

Aon touches down in London with NFL UK

By Luke Harman

CURRENT MANCHESTER UNITED shirt sponsor Aon signed up as an official partner of the National Football League (NFL) in the UK, October 23.

The global risk management and insurance brand will be designated an associate sponsor of the NFL's UK arm, as well as a sponsor of the International Series – an event which sees NFL regular-season matches played at Wembley Stadium in London.

Having relocated its corporate headquarters to London from Chicago in the US earlier this year, Aon's deal with the NFL UK is a major business-to-business (B2B) play to raise awareness of the move among the wider London-based insurance industry.

"This was all about our move to London," Phil Clement, Aon's global chief marketing officer (CMO) told Sports Marketing Frontiers. "We want to make sure the London community know that we are headquartered here and so we are doing things to bring attention to that."

The Property

As an official partner of the NFL in the UK, Aon has the rights to use the NFL logo and the International Series logo as part of its marketing efforts throughout the year.

Further, Aon will have rights to activate in the UK around NFL-owned events, including the annual player draft and the Super Bowl.

The Deal Makers

When headquartered in Chicago, Aon maintained a close relationship with local NFL franchise the Chicago Bears. Aon's interest in the NFL UK materialised last year after Chris Hibbs, vice president of sales and marketing for the Bears, introduced Aon's Phil Clement to the property when the team played in the 2011 International Series.

Following an introduction by New York-based independent sports marketing consultant Colleen Coursault, Clement then met directly with Mark Waller, CMO of the NFL in the US.

"He [Waller] and I got together in a pub to watch an English football game and discussed his vision for American football in England," says Clement. "It was one of those great cultural moments where you had an American (Clement) and an Englishman (Waller) talking about American football in London whilst watching an English Premier League game in New York."

Aon then proceeded to work with Alistair Kirkwood, managing director of NFL UK and Marc Reeves, the NFL's international commercial director.

Phil Clement was supported in brokering the deal by Patrick Pierce, director of sponsorships for Aon while TSMGI, Aon's activation partner agency, was also heavily involved at the negotiation stage.

Despite the number of players involved in making the sponsorship happen, Clement says the deal was done on a "very good handshake" in the summer and most of the activation leading up to this year's International Series game on October 27, was executed without a contract in place.

The Clincher

While conclusions have been drawn about Aon seeking alternative sponsorship options as a result of its shirt deal with Manchester United ending after next season, Clement is very clear that the NFL UK agreement is simply about consolidating the company's move to London, and using American football as a conversational platform in the B2B environment.

"Manchester United is as much about Africa, Asia and Brazil as it is about any other market," he says. "With B2B sponsorship, rather than spreading the message widely and simply, what we try to do is spread the message in a very targeted way; to fewer people but more deeply."

"So we will be looking at clients and prospects and discussing American football with them in a way that also allows us to talk about our business, especially in the areas of things like training and development and HR solutions, which are very easy to

discuss in relation to the NFL."

Aon can count a number of high-profile NFL UK sponsors among its prospects, with the likes of Pepsi, Budweiser, Visa and Barclaycard as fellow International Series sponsors, as well as a host of corporate brands as associate sponsors of the NFL subsidiary (see 'NFL UK sponsors').

Clement also points to Aon and NFL UK's shared emigration to London as a rationale for the partnership. "We have made a home here, the NFL is looking to make a more comfortable home here and we both want to spread interest in our respective brands."

What does it mean?

Despite growing levels of interest and ticket sales for the NFL's International Series game – 2013 will see two regular-season matches played at Wembley in one year for the first time – the NFL remains a rare occurrence for a select audience in the UK, presenting an opportunity for Aon to be an integral part of the sport's growth in the market.

To assist the NFL in educating the UK on American football, Aon will be running a series of 'football clinics' inspired by lessons learnt from taking Manchester United and English football to the US market.

According to Clement, the American football clinics will provide a platform for Aon to develop a different kind of relationship with its stakeholders.

"We will invite clients, colleagues and community leaders to bring their kids to the clinics where they can learn about American football," he says. "And in that context you can also talk about the values of the sport, such as how practice makes you better, what it is to live a healthy life and what athletes do to self-improve."

"There's a certain type of relationship you can create with people by going out to dinner with them, but there's another whole relationship you can build when you bring them together with their children to talk about what they want to do with their lives."

NFL UK Sponsors**International Series Sponsors**

Pepsi Max – Presenting Partner of International Series
Barclaycard, Budweiser, Visa, Aon

Associate Sponsors

Aon, Chrysler, EMC2, Foresight Energy, Gatorade, Marriot Rewards, Papa John's Pizza, Thomson Sport, Virgin Atlantic

"It's very meaningful way and there are lots of ways to facilitate it, but by having something fresh and interesting like the NFL in the UK is really helpful."

There are further lessons to be drawn from Aon's experience with Manchester United, with the company looking to maximise its NFL association via the non-partisan supporter base in the UK. "We found that English football is more of a spectacle when it's in the US than it is about the tribal nature in the UK – it's the same for American football in London," says Clement. "If we were to do an NFL sponsorship in the US it would have to be across the entire NFL, which is very expensive, or a team in a local market. In London we can be part of something that unifies all."

Aon sports sponsorship portfolio:

In 2010, after nearly 450 acquisitions over a 20-year period, Aon was the global number one in all of its core business sectors in terms of revenue. However, it was still not recognised as a top 500 global brand and executed a global marketing strategy to raise further awareness for the company. Sports sponsorship played a significant role in the strategy, with three projects rolled out simultaneously.

Manchester United

Aon agreed a four-year, £80m shirt sponsorship deal with Manchester United – the most expensive shirt deal in world football at the time. While Aon will remain as the club's principal partner until the end of next season, it will be replaced by Chevrolet in 2014 after the General Motors-owned brand agreed a seven-year deal earlier this year worth £350m (\$559m).

Vodafone McLaren Mercedes

Aon was revealed as a corporate partner of the McLaren Formula One team after the company logo appeared on the race overalls of Lewis Hamilton and Jenson Button at the 2010 Monaco Grand Prix. An Aon spokesperson said at the time: "[The McLaren team] offers an ideal platform to drive sales and enhance our business-to-business marketing activity, especially in the global accounts segment and across important growth geographies."

Team Aon

The third sports sponsorship initiative by the company in 2010, Team Aon was created through a commercial partnership between Aon and Arena International Motorsport. The racing team entered the World Touring Car Championship in 2012, taking to the global stage for the first time after registering two 1.6 litre turbo-charged Ford Focus cars, built and maintained by Arena.

**Board Report by Joel Seymour-Hyde, Strategy Director EMEI, Octagon**

Up until now, Aon's sponsorship portfolio has been dominated by the highly visible shirt deal with Manchester United and the partnership with the McLaren Formula One team, both of which have driven brand awareness and provided a platform to engage with customers and employees on a global basis.

However, in light of Chevrolet stepping in as the new Manchester United shirt sponsor in 2014 and making quite a noise about it (despite the incumbent), plus, if one was being provocative, Aon's exclusivity with United being somewhat undermined by DHL's training partner deal, it is understandable that they may wish to make tentative steps elsewhere in the market.

The NFL UK deal is on a significantly smaller scale than the aforementioned global partnerships, but this does

not necessarily make it off strategy. Aon has a history of "hometown sponsorships", having had a number of local market deals in place in Chicago, its former headquarters, in addition to having a number of senior Aon executives involved in the Chicago 2016 Olympics bid. The NFL UK appears to be another "hometown" deal, following the company's relocation to London.

As a B2B-focused organisation, the NFL UK sponsorship presents a natural link to help tell this chapter of the company's story to its customers. The focus of activation in the short term at least appears to be quality over quantity, with a "a series of football clinics for employees and business partners", reflecting their B2B focus but also arguably the fact that such a deal does not provide the rights for a bigger awareness drive

(and that they still have United for that in the short term).

Above and beyond the rights fee, the relationship is also a very positive story for the NFL UK – it provides them with a high profile partner to help promote the sport in the UK, and of course Aon's B2B connections will not be lost on an organisation always looking to grow its commercial relationships in this market.

The relationship with the NFL UK illustrates that Aon is a company which understands how sponsorship can be used to address a range of objectives, be they brand, internal or business, and how to use a portfolio approach to target specific business needs. In light of this, it will be very interesting to see what's next for Aon in terms of sponsorship, particularly as they start planning for a post Manchester United horizon.