

MEDIA Coverage



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Maize and blue merchandise is red hot ahead of Wolverines' title tilt

Breana Noble, Candice Williams and Myesha Johnson, *The Detroit News*

Ann Arbor — The M Den is prepping for several months of 24/7 operations if the Wolverines emerge victorious at Monday's National Championship game in Houston.

It would be the first national title since 1997 for the University of Michigan's football team, but even this past Monday's Rose Bowl victory is bringing a boom in sales as retailers of maize-and-blue merchandise roll out commemorative T-shirts, sweatshirts, hats and other memorabilia.

"It's new territory," said Scott Hirth, president and one of the owners of the official merchandise retailer of Michigan athletics. "There's definitely enthusiasm. Phones are ringing. People went right online after the game. There were a lot of people on the site shopping, which turned into orders for us."

The Wolverines will face the Washington Huskies at the NCAA College National Championship at NRG Stadium in Houston. The title run culminates Michigan's hiring of coach Jim Harbaugh, a star quarterback for the Wolverines in the 1980s, nine seasons ago.

A national title brings a large boost in revenue for universities and retailers, said David Perricone, associate professor of sports and entertainment management at Centenary University in New Jersey.

"It definitely moves more merchandise," he said. "It has greater demand upcoming for tickets, they also can receive more alumni contributions. Really the big picture —merchandise sales are one of many ways that they could capitalize on a national title. The high-profile victories generally produce short-term increases, also sponsorships, licensing and larger impact on donations."

As one example, Perricone noted a Forbes report in 2016 that online fan shop Fanatics saw triple-digit spikes in apparel sales for each of the four teams in the NCAA basketball Final Four that year.

"There's definitely going to be a spike, especially within that 24-hour period," he said.

Perricone said national titles draw in customers who might not otherwise buy a team's sports paraphernalia. He said popular mementoes are hats, T-shirts, sweatshirts and pennants.

"Even people who aren't fans, but live in the state they want to buy the merchandise," he said. They want something with the team's name on it."

Hirth at the M Den said the most popular products are the items players received on the field following the game like the \$40 Jordan University of Michigan Football 2024 Rose Bowl Game Champions Locker Room Hat. T-shirts range from \$25 for youth sizes to the \$35 "Just Won More" Jordan University of Michigan Football 2024 Rose Bowl Game Champions Navy Locker Room Tee. Sweatshirts are \$42 to \$58. There also are decals, lapel pins, pennants and framed panoramic and flyover shots from the Rose Bowl.

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UM alum James Henry of Ann Arbor was among Wolverine fans who stopped by M Den's State Street store on Wednesday to pick up multiple navy blue "Just Won More" T-shirts for his family. He's also hoping to travel to Houston with his wife for the game.

"It's only money, you can earn money, but you can't get memory," he said.

No signs of letting up

Hirth declined to share how much demand has spiked, but the store's distribution warehouse has been working 24/7 on two shifts all of December to fulfill orders for the holidays, and there's no sign of letting up. The Wolverines' three straight Big Ten conference titles have kept business busy the past few years.

In Birmingham, The Varsity Shop has stocked up on T-shirts, sweatshirts and hats marking UM's participation in the Rose Bowl and its Big Ten championship. Preparing for a title victory, the family-owned store's national vendors are working with local producers to start printing product Monday night if things are looking good for the Wolverines during the game to get items into the store on Tuesday and the rest of the week.

The store doesn't have any National Championship merchandise yet: "If they lose, nobody wants to remember that," said Marc Secontine, the store's managing partner freshly back from a trip to the Rose Bowl game. "They only want the winning situation."

There will be apparel, coffee mugs, house flags and more if Michigan wins it all.

Ahead of Monday's title tilt, one of the store's most popular products are \$25 T-shirts emblazoned with dueling helmets of UM and the University of Alabama Crimson Tide, the team the Wolverines beat in the Rose Bowl.

The Rose Bowl victory has extended a healthy holiday season, Secontine said, though Michigan merchandise tends to be pretty consistent in sales compared to Michigan State items that ebb and flow more in demand.

"People love to wear merchandise of winners," Secontine said. "Michigan fans are very true and supportive of their team. If they win the National Championship, it'll be a full year. The National Championship is longer than any other. No one can take it away from you. Even when the next season starts, people like to represent that accomplishment if and when that happens."

Leo Gabaron, a sales associate at M Den, said traffic at the two-story UM merchandise store has been up since last year.

"Especially with the win against Ohio State, we were having lines all the way up, wrapping around, we had lines that we're connecting all upstairs. There were so many people. I've never seen that many people in the store and it's just been increasing like that," Gabaron said.

Gabaron said shoppers have been spending hundreds at the register. "I've seen families especially rack up multiple 3 to 4-digit numbers in their expenses," he said. "A lot of people are buying multiple (items) for family members."

Officials with Dick's Sporting Goods said if the Wolverines win the National Championship, select stores in the Ann Arbor and greater Michigan areas will reopen immediately after the game to offer fans "an assortment of CFP Championship Michigan Wolverines merchandise." Championship gear will also be available online after the game.

If UM wins Monday night's game, Hirth said the M Den's collection will include hundreds of items. Products will be available as early as 6:30 a.m. in stores on Tuesday with some additional capabilities coming online and with local production. Price for apparel would be similar to the bowl collection.

"We've had a long time to get ready for a National Championship," Hirth said. "There'll be some great stuff."

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