

Delhomme scores deal with Bojangles'

Panther to promote Charlotte-based chain
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The Carolina Panthers quarterback with humble Louisiana roots and the Charlotte-based restaurant chain that cooks chicken Cajun style have teamed up in an endorsement deal.

Jake Delhomme, fresh from leading the Panthers to the Super Bowl, has agreed to promote Bojangles' restaurants in TV and radio ads, public appearances and in-store merchandise in the 11 Eastern states where Bojangles' operates, the company told the Observer Thursday. Neither Bojangles' nor Delhomme's agent would disclose terms of the deal.

It's the first regional endorsement deal for Delhomme. He has a Nike shoe contract, standard for many NFL players, and a local deal with PLB Sports Inc. for Jake's Flakes breakfast cereal, set to hit local shelves soon.

"He's a regular guy who's worked hard to get where he is, and we think Bojangles' reflects that," said Dave Riggs of Priority Sports & Entertainment, who represents Delhomme.

Delhomme rose from obscurity to take over as starting quarterback in the second game of the 2003 season and played a key role in the team's NFC championship before a heartbreaking 32-29 loss to the New England Patriots on Sunday.

The Breaux Bridge, La., native was at home and unavailable to comment on the deal Thursday.

Delhomme's representatives contacted Bojangles' last fall to ask about a deal, but the company was in the midst of debuting an October marketing blitz centered around the "GottawannaneedagetahavaBojangles'," tagline, said Randy Poindexter, the Bojangles' senior vice president for marketing. They told Delhomme then they'd talk with him again in January.

On Jan. 3, Delhomme was in the playoffs helping the Panthers beat the Dallas Cowboys. By the end of that week, he'd cemented a deal with Bojangles' that included a 20 percent bonus if Delhomme made the Super Bowl, Poindexter said.

Now that the season has ended, Bojangles' advertising agency PriceMcNabb is working on a batch of TV and radio spots for Delhomme set to air in April, and a second wave that will coincide with the start of the next football season.

Bojangles' President Tom Lewison credits last fall's marketing campaign with contributing toward a turnaround at Bojangles', which halted a pattern of sales declines

last year and expects a 5 percent gain in comparable store sales for the first quarter of this year. The 322-restaurant chain plans to open 50 more this year.

"We're working on enhancing our overall brand image. That's the cake, and having Jake endorse our product and brand, that's the icing," Lewison said.

If the new campaign with Delhomme is successful, it could be a steppingstone to high-profile endorsement deals for national brands such as McDonald's or Pepsi, said David Carter, principal with The Sports Business Group marketing firm. "Both Bojangles' and Jake were regional success stories this year, and they'd both like to become national success stories," he said.

But as for Delhomme, Riggs said he's not planning to go wild with endorsements.

"We're looking for a few quality partnerships," he said.