



Former NFL player Tiki Barber with Nickelodeon's Spongebob - Getty Images Sport

NEXT GENERATION ANIMATION

The NFL hopes through its partnership with cable network Nickelodeon, animated programming will capture the attention of youth markets both in the US and worldwide. Barry Wilner reports.

THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE already has most of adult America in its grasp. Teens take to pro football rapidly, but that leaves the youth market - 'the Nickelodeon generation' - a demographic now being targeted worldwide through its partnership with the Viacom/MTV-owned network.

For years, the league has worked with the network on integration of players and NFL themes into Nickelodeon shows and promotions. But about a year ago, Peter O'Reilly, the NFL vice president for fan strategy and marketing, discussed an initial vision for the 'NFL Rush Zone' - bringing the online world to life as an animated series on Nickelodeon.

"I believe right away we both recognised the power of bringing two different, but very powerful brands among youth, together," O'Reilly says. "We then set out to find the best way to leverage each other's strengths to form a partnership."

What they came up with was 'RUSH ZONE: Guardians of the Core', a co-production in which characters from all 32 NFL teams appear, along with numerous appearances by NFL players and coaches, within the series. The programme is designed to appeal to children who are already loyal NFL fans, as well as "kids who simply love a great hero's journey of good versus evil and may be still forming their passion for the NFL," says O'Reilly.

The show is airing on the Nicktoons channel this season and can be replayed on the NFL Network after the initial Nickelodeon run ends.

Just like other US sports, particularly the NBA and NASCAR, the NFL readily recognises the importance of a major presence in the youth market. "This is our next generation of fans," O'Reilly says. "We know the strong

correlation that exists between fans who became engaged with the NFL during the elementary school years and now have a lifelong passion for the NFL. We have many initiatives to serve and connect with our young fan base."

Included in these initiatives is NFLRUSH.com, the NFL Rush Zone virtual world that was launched in 2007 as a virtual playground for NFL kids. The game allows kids to create their personal NFL avatar, explore 32 team lands collecting pigskins, chat with friends and NFL players and play an assortment of games against one another. More than 20 per cent of NFL Rush Zone's traffic comes from outside the United States.

"We believe there are real opportunities to expand the site internationally, providing a fun and unintimidating entry point in the world of the NFL," adds O'Reilly.

"Given the proliferation of casual online gaming and role-playing games among tweens, we have been very focused on that area with NFLRUSH.com and NFL Rush Zone. We were the first sports property to launch a role-playing game world and are very excited about how deeply engaged so many young fans are."

This autumn the league will also launch a new fitness game for the Nintendo Wii called 'NFL Training Camp', allowing all ages, including youth and families, to train and compete through authentic NFL drills and workouts.

But the number one focus is online, says O'Reilly: "NFLRUSH.com has become the destination for young NFL fans to connect with the game, learn about NFL programmes, play fantasy football, share their stories and pictures and play lots of fun NFL-themed games. This is the online world that will expand to TV through the Nickelodeon animated series this fall."