

QUEEN OF NFL RETAIL

Bauer Alumna Moves From Accounting to a Top Role in Football League's
Consumer Products Department

By Wendell Brock





As vice president of the NFL's consumer products department, Natara Holloway (BBA '98) is in charge of brand, marketing and retail development — what she describes as “retail-tainment.”

Natara Holloway (BBA '98) didn't move from Houston to New York to work for the National Football League because she was a die-hard football fan. She did it because she had a passion for accounting and auditing — and had for a very long time.

“This will be very embarrassing,” Holloway jokes at the top of an interview about her life, her education, and her recent adventures in NFL retail. “There was an accounting team in high school, and I was a part of it.”

That's how, at a young age, the bubbly and spirited Holloway charted a path to success.

Looking back on her time at the University of Houston, the Bauer College alumna believes the experience offered her own extraordinary entrée into the city's dynamic business community. On the threshold of graduating with a degree in — you guessed it — accounting, Holloway scored an internship with Exxon, parlayed that into a full-time position with the oil-and-gas giant (now ExxonMobil) and honed skills that would make her a smart “trade” from the world of energy to the inner ranks of professional football.

In her 11 years with the NFL, Holloway has cut a swath through the sports organization's

internal audit, corporate development and consumer products divisions. Today, she is the vice president in charge of brand, marketing and retail development for the league's consumer products department. Her role: To engage fans with compelling consumer experiences — to put the “fun” in the process of buying those Houston Texans coffee mugs, Atlanta Falcons toddler beanies and New York Giants earrings.

“You could always get a hat and a T-shirt,” Holloway explains of her mandate to broaden the NFL retail appeal. “Now you might get a hat, a T-shirt and an autograph. Or you might

dance or see some entertainment while you shop. We like to call it 'retail-tainment.' So it's more about engaging with the fans and making sure it's a memory — not just a transaction."

If anyone can put pizzazz in the NFL shopping bag, that would be Holloway. A military brat who was born in Germany but considers Texas home, she punctuates her conversation with infectious laughter and lives to prove that "successful people can be nice."

"One of my old bosses used to call me the Oprah of the NFL," says Holloway, who keeps a "personal board of directors" on call for when she needs guidance and support.

As a kid, the retail-preneurial Holloway created shops in her home and made her family buy back clothes and jewelry they had given her as gifts. When her older sister took her on a college visit to UH, she fell in love with the city and the campus.

"It was absolutely beautiful. And I just thought Houston was so interesting, because I always knew I wanted to go into business. It has so many Fortune 500 companies. The opportunities are just abundant there. It was a no-brainer for me, an absolute no-brainer."

It was probably a no-brainer for Exxon to scoop up this bright and articulate accounting major — first as an intern, then as an employee. Holloway was president of the UH chapter of the National Association of Black Accountants and graduated magna cum laude.

After her internship with the multinational oil and gas company, she was brought in as an inventory accountant. "I basically counted barrels of domestic crude oil for two years," she says with typical candor. In her six years with the company, she worked as a cost accountant, led the inventory group during the merger with Mobil and finished up in the downstream audit group.

All of which made her a prime candidate for the NFL.

With NFL business booming, "they wanted to have more controls and put a robust audit practice in place," she says. As it turned out, the experience was a "phenomenal way to get to know the organization," Holloway says, because she was required to oversee the audit of every department. (Having a daughter work for the NFL also made her dad very happy.)

During a stint in the strategy group, Holloway was asked to write a plan for a potential retail business. "They were like: 'OK, you wrote the strategy. Now go run it.'"

In her consumer products role, Holloway has focused on making the retail operation more attractive to certain segments of the market — women, for instance.

One project she's proud of is producing the first-ever NFL pop-up store for women. A month before the start of the 2010 New Orleans Saints season, Holloway's group opened a pop-up on Magazine Street. The experiment was so successful it earned the NFL Commissioner's Innovation Award.

"We had products for females for years, but they weren't receiving the attention they deserved," Holloway says. "But the way we showcased and highlighted them, they were like, 'Oh, you guys have new products,' and so it was really about change in the retail experience, and how females consumed the NFL." Since then, her team has created marketing campaigns focused on men's lifestyle, juniors and "homegating."

If not for Bauer, Holloway believes she might not have had such a charmed career.

"I would not have done an internship had I gone to any other school," she says. "But I was right there with the businesses and could talk to them, and the career fairs that we had were tremendous. We had two floors worth of companies because it was in their backyard. I came to business with a whole different mindset because I had already been there, done that sort of thing. I had already networked with CEOs. I had already networked with vice presidents."



THE QUOTABLE NATARA HOLLOWAY

On why she studied accounting:

"I was like: 'I am going to be an accountant. That is the coolest profession ever. There is no other career where you get to count money.'"

On why she took a job with the NFL:

"I was looking to really expand my audit skills. I loved, loved, loved audit. It was weird. I always tell people: 'You cut me, I bleed numbers.'"

On being nice: "I was told (by a previous employer) that I could never succeed because I was too nice. So, it became my personal mission to kind of debunk that myth. I am a Christian, I feel like I am a nice person, and I don't feel like you have to be a bad person to succeed."

On the benefits of Bauer:

"I think the exposure I got at the University of Houston to different CEOs, different businesses and just understanding the business environment, is something that is kind of overlooked as a selling point for that school. You cannot get that at Texas A&M and UT, because you are not right there (in a city) with those businesses."