

Retail & Consumer industry

US group Fanatics kicks off football merchandise push

Company wants to tap into growing Stateside interest in the world's biggest sport



Fanatics CEO Michael Rubin: 'Soccer should be our number one business' © The Washington Post/Getty Images

Samuel Agini 52 MINUTES AGO

Fanatics, the US merchandiser known for its American football jerseys, has outlined ambitions to sell more European soccer kit, highlighting growing American interest in the world's most popular sport.

“Soccer should be our number one business,” Michael Rubin, the billionaire chief executive of the sports retailer told the Financial Times. “We’re playing catchup.”

Fanatics’ partners include the National Football League, Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association and Nike, allowing the Florida-based group to manufacture and sell jerseys and other merchandise.

The company, which expects to generate \$8bn of revenue this year, already works with some of Europe’s leading clubs, including Paris Saint-Germain, Manchester United, Chelsea FC and Bayern Munich. Rubin says he now wants to make acquisitions beyond its domestic market to increase Fanatics’ revenues from football.

Rubin's ambitions in the sport show how there are more ways for businesses to make money from the beautiful game beyond acquiring clubs. US investors were behind the [£2.5bn acquisition](#) of Chelsea FC, the €1.2bn [takeover of Italian champions AC Milan](#) and the [€800mn purchase](#) of French team Olympique Lyonnais.

Fanatics was valued at \$31bn in a \$700mn fundraising led by Clearlake Capital last December, the investment firm that also led the Chelsea deal. The US National Football League, National Hockey League and Major League Baseball are also shareholders in Fanatics.

Rubin's comments come shortly after Fanatics acquired Italian sports retailer and ecommerce company EPI, which it expects to help it with its push into European football.

EPI clients include Italian football clubs AC Milan, Inter Milan and Juventus as well as Atalanta BC, Bologna FC, ACF Fiorentina, SS Lazio, and the Italian Football Federation, expanding Fanatics' position in Europe.

Fanatics bought EPI, which employs 150 people, from a private equity fund managed by Quadrivio Group for an undisclosed sum. EPI is Fanatics' first acquisition in Europe since it bought UK-based online retailer Kitbag in 2016.

Fanatics has gone from being primarily a retailer of third-party products to a company, which can also manufacture goods itself. The ability to produce and distribute particular merchandise means it can respond quickly when a particular athlete performs well and fans flock to buy their kit.

The company also bolstered its position in collectibles through the acquisition of trading cards business Topps last year, and is building a betting division.

Rubin, who has sold everything from vegetable seeds to ski equipment and sports merchandise, sold ecommerce group GSI, which included Fanatics, to auction site eBay in 2011 for \$2.4bn. He later bought back the Fanatics brand to focus on the sports market.

"Today, NFL is our biggest business, baseball's our second biggest business, college is our third biggest business, and then NBA and then global soccer," he added.