



COVER STORY

SHIRT TALES

How Ryan Vesler has grown
Homage through licensing
deals, sports idols & pop stars.

DAN EATON, PAGE 4

T H E L I S T WODA COOPER MOVES TO TOP OF DEVELOPERS LIST 24-25

COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

300 Marconi Blvd.,
Suite 105
Columbus, OH 43215

April 19-25, 2024
Vol. 44, No. 34



REAL ESTATE

New complex will complete Beulah Park

A mixed-use development will wrap
up the buildout at the former race
track in Grove City.

JOHN BUSH, 18





PHOTOS BY DAN TRITTSCHUH FOR CBF

Homage's executive team includes, from left to right, Tony Dorsey, Danielle Miller, Ryan Vesler, Steve Werman, and Andrew Jacobs, shown at the brand's Easton Town Center store.

PHOTO BY DAN TRITTSCHUH FOR CBF

LICENSE DEALS KEEP HOMAGE HIP, GROWING

The Columbus-based retailer says nimbleness, major-league partnerships & celebrities are driving its success

Homage can't continue to share stories about the past without a constant eye on the future. ¶ Though experience has honed the details, the game plan for the Columbus-based retailer hasn't changed much since Ryan Vesler launched the business from his parent's Bexley basement in 2007. ¶ His company steadily built a roster of licensing partners over the years ranging from pop culture – *The Office*, *Peanuts*, *Ghostbusters* – to sports, signing with nearly all the major leagues, including the National Football League, which it gained in 2021. ¶ Combined, those relationships have kept the business growing. Sales were up 26% in 2023.

Athletes, actors and media stars sport Homage apparel. LeBron James boosted sales by wearing its shirts. Popular NFL stars Travis and Jason Kelce are official partners.

"We truly try to tick a lot of boxes," said Elliott May, vice president of business development and licensing. "I think that's why we've become a favorite licensee. We're the people they have in their own closet."

"I feel like the things that we have access to and the things that we're coming up with as a team are the best that we've ever done," Vesler said.

The founder is in a new stage, too.



BY DAN EATON
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The executive team in place today, including May and CFO Steve Werman, has such a firm grip on day-to-day operations that Vesler is free to fully focus on the creative side.

"I've asked them to do extraordinary things and work harder than they've ever had to work before," Vesler said. "I've never felt more optimistic, personally and creatively."

Homage employs 100 today and it's hunting for new office space as its facility near John Glenn Columbus International Airport is almost

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fully dedicated to production and shipping.

The company declined to disclose its annual revenue.

'New Heights'

Though it has strong Ohio roots, roughly 70% of Homage sales are outside the state. The NFL is a big driver.

"It's an amazing opportunity to talk to fans all over the world," Vesler said. "We're this small Columbus, Ohio, brand ... that has morphed into more of a national brand."

Its deal with the NFL puts Homage gear into team stores at stadiums nationwide, while also stocking Homage's online store with shirts featuring team logos, players and co-branded designs with partners including the football video game Tecmo Bowl and the Grateful Dead.

Kyle Brandt, co-host of the NFL Network's *Good Morning Football*, in 2017 started *Angry Runs*, a weekly segment during which he singles out the toughest runs from that weekend's action. Winners received

a scepter and a shirt made by one of Brandt's friends.

"I couldn't go a single day without getting a message from someone saying, 'Where can I get that shirt?'" he said.

His initial thought was to work with Fanatics, the largest NFL license holder.

"But someone suggested Homage," Brandt said. "I admit I was reluctant at first. Then I went to ... Homage.com and it was like Willy Wonka's chocolate factory to me."

Brandt's not a passive partner. Shirts don't hit the website without his approval.

"It's an absolute pleasure," he said. "It's one of the highlights of my week."

Homage has worked with Travis and Jason Kelce for several years and is the official apparel partner of their popular *New Heights* podcast.

"That's been an unreal partnership, an incredibly passionate listener base," Vesler said. "We both took a chance on each other, but it's worked great."

A mutual acquaintance at Tra-

Elliott May is vice president of business development and licensing for Homage.



HOMAGE HISTORY

The vintage-inspired retailer has grown thanks to partnerships with major league sports, pro players and pop culture icons. Here are some key events and licensing deals:

2007

Ryan Vesler creates Homage.

2007

Ohio State University becomes its first licensing partner.

2010

Original Short North store opens.

2011

Larry Bird signs a deal with the company.

2012

Easton Town Center store opens.

2014

Short North store moves to its current location at 783 N. High St.

2015

MLS signs an Initial license. Homage featured a select few teams at first, but got the full league license in 2024.



MADDIE MCGARVEY FOR CBF

vis Kelce's management team, A&A Management, connected the two sides.

Of course Travis Kelce isn't just a football star. Thanks to his relationship with pop supernova Taylor Swift, his profile and fan base stretch well beyond the playing field.

Taylor Swift fans on TikTok have worn *New Heights* gear from Homage. When Swift herself wore a *New Heights* hat during the first weekend of Coachella this month, the company said sales of the hat spiked 170 times their normal volume in the days following, forcing Homage to restock inventory twice and counting.

Ultimate Warriors

Before Homage tackled the NFL, it signed with the National Basketball Association in 2016.

"They helped us prove we're more than just an 'Ohio' T-shirt," May said.



When I first started, I didn't think anything bad could ever happen."

– Ryan Vesler, CEO

Though Homage has produced a number of popular pieces for the league, including its NBA Jam series, the brand's biggest moment didn't involve a basketball shirt.

When the Cleveland Cavaliers came back from a 3-1 deficit to win the NBA championship in 2016, the Homage team stayed up that night creating designs to capitalize on the moment. Then LeBron James stepped off the team plane wearing an Homage shirt with WWE personality the Ultimate Warrior.

Homage quickly ran out of the blue shirts needed to make it, but scrambled and got permission from the WWE and NBA to redo the shirt in Cavs colors.

"Talk about a crazy convergence of the licensing world," May said. "That could've never been coordinated by us, but it was one of those moments where the authenticity rang true.

They cast their own story."

Growing pains

It hasn't all been smooth sailing.

Stores have closed. Investments intended to grow the business didn't. Sales have fluctuated.

"It's never linear," Vesler said. "Once you go through tough times, it can have a very grounding effect on you. I contrast that with when I first started. I didn't think anything bad could ever happen."

And some partners simply didn't work out.

"Just because a person or group has millions of followers doesn't mean their audience is going to buy something," Vesler said. "It's more about how passionate and engaged that audience is. That's what we see with *New Heights*."

Homage is doing a better job of bringing in new customers, nurturing those relationships and being disciplined to admit when something isn't working.

"Back in the day, we'd release

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2015
Homage moves into new headquarters near John Glenn Columbus International Airport.

2016
U.S. Soccer signs a deal with the company.

2016
NBA signs a deal with the company.

2016
WWE signs a deal with the company.

2017
MLB signs a deal with the company.

2019
Nickelodeon and MTV sign deals with the company.

2021
Warner Bros. signs a deal with the company.

2021
NFL signs a deal with the company.

2023
The Homage Bar opens in the Graduate hotel in the Short North.

SOURCE: HOMAGE, COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST RESEARCH

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products through the lens of, “This is cool,” Vesler said. “But effectively, we would be talking to our existing audience over and over and over again.”

Growing up also means taking a by-the-book approach that has helped win relationships in the long term – no blatant infringements or even cutesy skirting the lines to make a short-term buck.

“We have to become partners with these leagues because there’s a limited ceiling when it comes to rolling the dice with something unlicensed,” Vesler said. “Years later, we’re partners.”

Going social

Now Homage has to keep a close eye on its designs as it’s easy for copycats to swipe its images from social media to produce counterfeits.

“The same technology that’s enabling a business like Homage to grow is being harnessed in ways that are very difficult to stop,” Vesler said. “Digital printing and on-demand printing make it very difficult to enforce IP around the world.”

This past holiday season, Homage experienced a direct attack from ripoff websites that siphoned possible sales and left Homage holding the bag. Customers placed orders with the fakes and blamed Homage when they didn’t get the merchandise.

“I’ve never seen this level of intensity,” Vesler said. “They were putting our name in their domain and selling items at ridiculously low prices.”

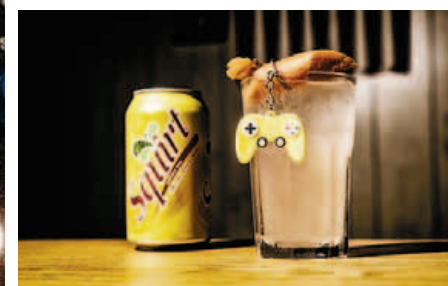
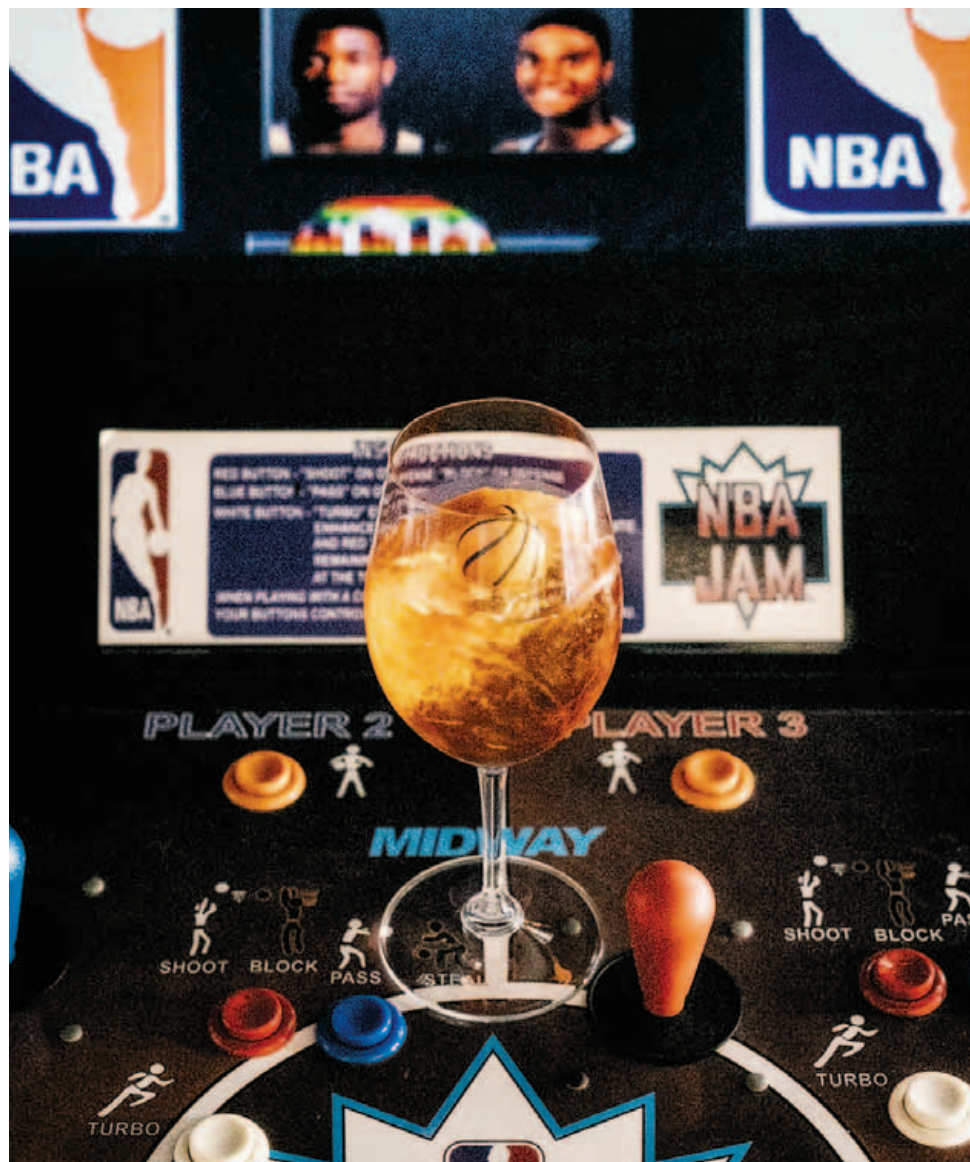
“If you talk to any large company, they have teams devoted to this, but we’re still small,” he said. “We’ve never encountered this before.”

Homage isn’t resting on its wins, which means it’s chasing new relationships.

The National Hockey League is the only major sports league yet to form a relationship with the company.

Pop culture has been in the DNA since day one, but it’s a much more splintered world than sports.

“When you’re working with a league, they’re a closed ecosystem,” Vesler said. “But pop culture, there’s a lot of licensees and a lot of distribution channels. They don’t have an NFL store or a team store where 50,000 to 100,000 fans are showing



EXTERIOR PHOTO BY DAN EATON | CBF; BEVERAGE PHOTOS BY WADE HALL | GRADUATE HOTELS

The Homage Bar inside the Graduate Hotel in the Short North puts the brand’s vibe front and center.

up on a regular basis.”

In terms of pop culture, Nintendo remains the team’s Holy Grail.

“We’ll keep putting good vibes in the universe,” Vesler said. “I’ll tell Nintendo that Elliott and I will dress up as Mario and Luigi if that’s what it takes.”

The company also recently expanded its women’s apparel and added youth sizes.

Stores were a growth channel at one point, with Homage expanding to Cleveland, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. Those have since closed and two Columbus shops remain.

“I’m definitely open to new stores,” Vesler said, adding that they need to be an experience.

“Something that’s just transactional doesn’t excite me,” he said. “For us to be successful at the store level, it’s going to have to be some combination of unique elements.”

There are business practicalities, too. Homage’s online assortment is infinite and there’s no loss because shirts aren’t made until they’re sold.

On the flip side, stocking a store means choosing the right mix of designs and sizes to avoid unsold inventory.

But anyone who has ever talked to Vesler knows he’s always believed that Homage is more than a T-shirt.

“I think we have a lot of brand elasticity,” he said. “Could Homage exist as a sports bar? It’s the same

thesis, the same curiosity around storytelling and content.”

That experiment is live now.

The company licensed its name to the Short North’s Graduate hotel, where the Homage Bar sports a similar nostalgic décor and features food and drink inspired by sports and history.

Another goal is new media – Homage’s own hub of videos, stories and house-produced content.

“As a storyteller, that’s something I’ve always dreamed about,” Vesler said. “If I look into some sort of crystal ball for the future, hopefully we’ll be telling stories in new ways. Content and commerce. That’s my interest.” ❧