

Cowboys wide receiver tackles bread business

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Dallas Cowboys wide receiver Keyshawn Johnson plans to open 12 Panera Bread cafés in Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties over the next five years under his newest venture, First Picks Bread Co.

Ingrid Roberts, managing director for the company, said the first café will be in a shopping center in eastern Ventura County or Westlake Village, although she could not say exactly where without a signed contract.

Johnson is the CEO of First Picks, a franchise holding company in Los Angeles, which is generally focused on food and beverage. When it got the license for the Tri-Counties, Roberts said the company planned to open first in Ventura County because there are so many people who regularly travel to Los Angeles and they might be familiar with the shop.

Panera Bread is similar to The Corner Bakery brand, with quick-food options at a higher price point and quality than average fast food. There are 825 Panera Bread outlets, with the closest ones in Santa Clarita, Studio City and Santa Monica.

"It's a very refined segment," Roberts said. The food is a little healthier and a little better prepared, and the outlets have a little better atmosphere than most fast-food eateries, she added.

The restaurants will serve breakfast, lunch and dinner, with fresh-baked breads, bagels and thin-crust pizzas.

Johnson also owns Cold Stone Creamery stores in the Dallas area, and in the past owned the high-end restaurants Reign in Beverly Hills and Profusions in Tampa, Fla. The midrange Panera Bread is right for the area, Roberts said.

"We feel the casual-dining segment is a favored consumer choice these days," she said.

Franchises, or the right to use an established business model and name, are generally given within some defined market area.

Roberts said the coastal California region was an appealing market because it is close to the company's headquarters, and Johnson intends to move to Calabasas when he retires. The company will be making Ventura County the home base sometime in the near future, she added.

First Picks, a name that refers to Johnson being the first pick in the 1996 NFL draft, chose to go with the Panera Bread franchise because it is a favorite of Johnson's and it is a business that can become part of customers' daily routines.

Panera requires franchisees to have \$7.5 million in assets, which allows a new owner to pay \$35,000 in fees to the company to open and more than \$1 million that Panera estimates it will cost to start.

The franchisee pays 5 percent of gross sales to Panera after opening.

The International Franchise Association reported franchise businesses accounted for nearly 10 million jobs in the country in 2001, with \$625 billion in economic impact. Franchise businesses have been growing steadily since the 1950s, according to the association.

Getting into a long-term business is a prudent choice for professional athletes before the day they can no longer play, said William M. Thompson, certified financial planner in Fresno.

"Because the careers are relatively short — he might be out of football at age 35, and he will have 35 productive years ahead of him — it is important to think about this," he said.

Players who already have a hand in business and know what interests them are going to make the transition more easily, he said. "His desire was to create opportunities to step out of football and step right into the realm of business," Roberts said.

The National Football League Players Association recently started providing a roster of financial planners who have been vetted for use by players and their managers. Roberts said Johnson wants to be a role model for other players so they can build something more than a short-lived football career.

Johnson is also the president and chief operating officer of Keyshawn Capital Development, a real estate development firm, and the president of The Keyshawn Johnson Education Fund.