

# CASE STUDY

## Allstate Good Hands Nets

How an insurance giant redefined the power of sponsorship for nontraditional sports brands



### BRAND

Allstate

### PLATFORM

College football

### OBJECTIVE

Create a highly-disruptive, scalable, and ownable asset

Primary Data Source:

Lefton, T., and Smith, M. (2014, May 26). Allstate's Net Gain. In *SportsBusiness Journal*.  
<https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/Journal/Issues/2014/05/26/In-Depth/Allstate.aspx>



Allstate's Good Hands field goal nets have become one of the single greatest examples of a nonendemic brand making itself endemic to a sport, leading to incredible returns for all partners.

"They're woven into the fabric of the game."

- Ed Erhardt, President Global Customer Marketing and Sales, ESPN

## BACKGROUND

These days, Allstate is a staple of the sports marketing world between August and January. Its ironclad ownership position in college football is rivaled by few corporate partners. But, like any other success story, this wasn't always the case, and the Fortune 100 company overcame obstacle after obstacle on its way to breaking new ground in the sports landscape. And one piece of its partnership portfolio in particular has cemented its place among elite sponsors at any level.

In 2004, college football had, by certain metrics, become the number two sport in America by popularity behind the NFL.

## CHALLENGE

When sports and entertainment agency Van Wagner first presented the idea of branded nets, marketing executives at Allstate immediately saw the potential. The connection was crystal clear: field goal nets protect fans behind the goal posts, Allstate's brand promise centers on protecting its customers. With nobody leveraging this space at the time, the nets were the perfect opportunity to own an asset that would not only transform its visibility on site and on TV, but also insert it directly into the game itself.

Unfortunately, not everyone on the sports side jumped on board as quickly, and Allstate had its work cut out for it if it wanted to see this dream become a reality.

### Structural Challenges

Although commonplace in the NFL by then, protective end zone nets were relatively rare in college football at the turn of the century. Van Wagner estimated 30% of stadiums used them at most. The rest merely relied on the fans to toss the balls back after each kick. As for those venues that did feature the nets, there was no standard blueprint for their construction and placement. Rigging was attached to poles in the ground for some and directly to the stadium for others. This lack of uniformity created both structural and financial uncertainty.

### Rights Challenges

College football is essentially an amalgamation of rights holders that have different stakes in the game. The NCAA, Division I conferences, individual schools, and broadcast partners all have a say in bringing game day to life. Up until this time, the nets had never even been considered, and their function as a marketing asset wasn't documented in any of the numerous sponsorship or broadcast contracts that made up the business side of college football. Rights ownership was as up in the air as the nets themselves.

### Broadcast Challenges

ESPN, one of the sport's biggest media rights holders, objected to the use of nets due to perceived production problems and obstructed views they would cause. Even more importantly, the network saw the move as an ambush-marketing tactic. It worried the nets would cannibalize revenue from a key advertising partner in Allstate, as well as trigger a wave of similar attempts by other sponsors that would both redirect media budgets and potentially rankle category competitors who also had investments in college football programming.

The reason this was so compelling was the tie-in to the equity of the Allstate brand and its promise of 'You're In Good Hands.' Allstate stands for protection. The net essentially protects people.

Jonathan Ruchman,  
Marketing Manager, Allstate

## SOLUTION

Allstate's launch of the nets program with its first 30 schools in 2005 was the result of intensive collaboration among a host of stakeholders, all of whom eventually bought into the landmark big idea.

### 1. Structural Solutions


On the school side, the parties conducted site visits to test different forms of rigging, as well as to ensure game visibility would remain unobscured. Although the nets now come in different sizes to accommodate different stadium requirements, the "Good Hands" logo is invariably a 22-foot square, creating consistency for attendees and television viewers everywhere. The schools not only receive new protective hard goods for their fans, but they also enjoy donations from Allstate to their scholarship funds for every field goal kicked into those Good Hands.

### 2. Rights Solutions

From an ownership standpoint, the universities ultimately claimed control of the nets, and therefore partnerships would need to be entered into with individual schools or their rights holders. For groups like Learfield and IMG College, this was a boon to their collegiate business model, which involved purchasing the marketing rights to dozens of high-level sports programs in order to sell them in bulk nationally. The Allstate field goal nets served as a compelling case study for them, demonstrating how a fragmented landscape like college sports could be unified for corporate sponsors.

### 3. Broadcast Solutions

Television partners like ESPN, CBS, and FOX eventually realized that, rather than discouraging ad spend from Allstate, the nets would incentivize it to double down in the sport to maximize the net program's exposure and returns. Net-specific creative has been skillfully integrated into seasonal spots that Allstate places within every broadcast in which its nets are displayed. As Ed Erhardt, ESPN President of Global Customer Marketing and Sales, commented after the launch, "The good thing was that Allstate was a quality partner we trusted and we could build something together to make them like a fabric of the game. We had to be very conscious that the exposure was appropriately valued by Allstate and by us, within our larger relationship." That relationship did indeed expand as quickly as the following year, when the brand unseated long-time Sugar Bowl title sponsor Nokia and purchased Bowl Championship Series marketing rights from the network.



Allstate's made it the centerpiece of their sports marketing, and now they're a brand that's inseparable from college football.

Bill Barbera,  
SVP Sales, Van Wagner

## RESULTS

Allstate worked hard to make its vision become a winning scenario for everyone involved. Even though it took a little longer to convince a handful of stragglers (such as Oklahoma head coach Bob Stoops, who ordered the nets be taken down the first time he saw them), they eventually gained universal acceptance. Allstate knew its nets had truly arrived when legendary ABC/ESPN sportscaster Brent Musberger plugged them during a pregame broadcast. He recalled how a placekicker he'd spoken with used the Good Hands as his target, creating invaluable earned media for the brand.

It's extremely rare for a nonendemic brand like an insurance company to literally become organic to the game, but Allstate pulled it off in a natural, authentic way. For many D-I football

programs on the rise, they know they've "made it" when the nets become fixtures at their stadiums. Allstate's on-field presence as a result is as widely recognized—and accepted—as Gatorade's sideline coolers and AT&T's branded headsets.

By the tenth year of its program, Allstate had signed net deals with **78 schools, 23 bowls, 10 neutral-site games, and four conference championships**. The associated investment has paid off for Allstate and for others. Repucom estimates the field goal nets provide an **average of \$48,739 in media per game**. With the branding being featured in **more than 500 games per year**, this equates to an **exposure value exceeding \$25 million each season**. The company's local agents have also

benefitted and are leveraging the association through tailgate activation and themed office events. Thanks to Allstate's donation for every field goal kicked into its nets, participating schools have received **over \$3 million for their scholarship funds since 2005**.

Allstate's nets program is now considered the centerpiece of a horizontally-integrated college football sponsorship portfolio. This includes the aforementioned ESPN slate of partnerships, Allstate AFCA Good Works Team award, College Football Playoff, and broadcast talent endorsements. Collectively, and led by the now-ubiquitous Good Hands nets, Allstate has cemented itself as one of, if not *the*, most preeminent brands in college football.