

		BOT 8TH	WCAU/FSMW	TOP 5TH	FSSW/RSN	TOP 5TH	RTPT	BOT 1ST	FSAZ	DELAY	:SCH
TOP EVENTS	MLB	 STL	1	 TOR	0	 PIT	2	 ARI	0	 CWS	0
		 PHI	3	 TEX	7	 MIL	2	 COL	1	 MIN	0

SPORTS ON EARTH

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PINK-SHADED MARKETING



The NFL goes pink in October for A Crucial Catch, its breast cancer awareness campaign, but questionable motives are also at work. (USA TODAY Sports)

By Ryan Basen

A few years ago, Larry Fitzgerald sat in a dark room to shoot a spot for the American Cancer Society (ACS). Clad in a light pink polo shirt buttoned to the top, the Arizona Cardinals' star receiver lifted his head and looked at the camera as it zoomed in to capture his face. "I'm proud to wear pink," he said, "as part of the NFL's Crucial Catch campaign, to help the American Cancer Society fight back against breast cancer." Fitzgerald smiled. The camera panned down and revealed hot pink-hued wristbands covering his wrists, replete with the NFL logo. "Together with the NFL and the American Cancer Society," Fitzgerald continued, "you can fight breast cancer and save lives."

Can you?

This October marks the fifth year that the NFL has partnered with ACS and league corporate partners to run A Crucial Catch, the league's month-long breast cancer awareness campaign. It raises awareness and funds for breast cancer causes supported by ACS and team charities.

But A Crucial Catch is not as altruistic as it is presented to be. Research suggests that the NFL and its corporate partners are more concerned with enhancing their public images -- especially among women -- and ultimately revenues, than they are with addressing breast cancer, and they seek to manipulate NFL fandom in the name of public health.

Each year, A Crucial Catch organizers have encouraged NFL players and officials to don pink-hued gear, hang banners and paint the campaign's official logo (a pink ribbon pinned onto the NFL shield) on NFL fields. They have also manufactured and sold official campaign apparel and game-worn NFL gear, and produced ads including the spot featuring Fitzgerald, as well as a [comprehensive campaign website](#), among other initiatives.

The point is to raise funds for breast cancer research and awareness programs, and to spread the campaign's primary message. It's a message promulgated by ACS: Women 40 and over should get screened for the disease annually. That memo has reached its targeted demographic, according to the NFL. The 2011 A Crucial Catch campaign reached 58 million female viewers 18 and up, and 64 percent of female NFL fans could identify its key screening message.

This philanthropic effort, however, has ulterior motives besides aiding the breast cancer cause. To wit:

- The NFL wants to attract and cultivate new female fans, and to enhance its image.
- The NFL's partners in this campaign -- including Pepsi, Ticketmaster and Barclays -- want to enhance their images as well.
- ACS hopes to engender support for its breast cancer awareness programs, instead of those supported by foundations with different ideas about how to counter the disease.

A Crucial Catch is an example of *cause-related marketing* -- using marketing strategies in a partnership to benefit both a social cause and an enterprise. The cause receives attention and funds. The enterprises' public image is enhanced, which ultimately leads to more profits. Cause marketing can be especially potent when applied to sports, because consumers have emotional attachments to teams and athletes that can easily be mined to raise awareness and funds.

A Crucial Catch is a unique, immense cause-marketing campaign. The NFL and ACS are heavyweights in their field, and a third group (the corporate partners) is involved. Here's how it works: The NFL's ubiquity and popularity spread awareness for ACS' cause throughout October. The NFL and its corporate partners also generate revenues by selling and auctioning pink hats, shirts and other A Crucial Catch apparel.

This is where the campaign gets murky. While all proceeds from auctioned game-worn items go to breast cancer causes, the league declines to say what portion of the apparel sales do. Inquiring minds can estimate, however. Ticketmaster limited its 2012 A Crucial Catch contribution to 10 cents for every ticket sold last October (up to \$40,000 total), and *The New York Times* reported that Old Navy donated only five percent of revenues to a foundation via a similar 2011 campaign featuring the Dallas Cowboys. Charlotte Jones Anderson, the daughter of Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, supervised this campaign, and Anderson in December was appointed chairwoman of a new NFL foundation that will direct league community efforts.

The bottom line: The league hardly donates much to "fight" breast cancer. You'd need to use scientific notation with negative exponents to

express what percentage of the NFL's annual revenues it contributes via A Crucial Catch. The campaign raised a combined \$4.5 million during its first four years (2009-2012), including \$1.5 million last year. League-wide revenues approached \$8 billion in 2009, when NFL teams earned a median profit of \$28.6 million, according to [The Economics of the National Football League](#), a 2012 book edited by Kevin G. Quinn. (The NFL says it plans to donate \$23 million to all community causes this year -- less than one percent of its likely revenues.)

If they are not really concerned with aiding breast cancer causes, then, why do the NFL and its corporate partners* orchestrate this campaign? The cynical answer is that they are more interested in their images, and in growing their products and revenues. They are seeking to attract new consumers, usually female, and to establish a positive connection with them.

**Several corporate partners, including Nike, Gatorade and New Era, either declined to comment or did not return messages seeking comment.*

Women are the primary target of this campaign in part because the NFL and its corporate partners view them as a growing, desirable consumer demographic. The NFL has been marketing itself increasingly to women since the early 1990s, seeking to capture new fans in order to prevent TV ratings from suffering declines that have plagued other major sports leagues. The league launched a women's clothing line featuring products crafted by Nike and 5th & Ocean, A Crucial Catch licensee partners, and a page on NFL.com exclusively for women. It has organized concerts featuring pop artists before its national televised season-openers, and during Super Bowl halftime shows. It has also capitalized on its broadcast partners' embracing of new technologies to make NFL telecasts and other league coverage more intimate and appealing to women -- a strategy some researchers have likened to turning the NFL into a soap opera.

The league's marketing efforts seem to be working. Its female TV audience nearly tripled between the late 1960s and early 2000s, the span of about one generation (according to "Football Fans *Do* Wear Pink," Kathy Brady's 2012 book chapter about female NFL fans). The NFL recognizes that nearly half its fan base is now female, with 93 million watching some part of the 2010 season, [Slate.com reported](#).

Organizers sell A Crucial Catch to women, and NFL fandom at large, by inducing us to feel as if we are affecting meaningful social change when aiding the campaign. By donating to ACS, we are led to believe that we can save lives by encouraging more women to undergo breast cancer screenings more often.

This logic has major flaws. Many researchers debate ACS' preferred strategies to address breast cancer, for one. They argue that annual screenings are not recommended for women in their 40s because they can lead to false positives and unnecessary biopsies. Other researchers argue that ACS is too focused on treating breast cancer, instead of preventing it. A Crucial Catch has diverted attention away from prevention strategies -- including research into companies that support ACS breast cancer causes, companies who have been accused of selling products that may *cause* breast cancer.

ACS is a major player within a hegemonic breast cancer awareness culture that favors treatment over prevention -- a culture that leading researcher [Samantha King](#) has called "the cult meof pink ribbons." Researchers including [Phaedra C. Pezzullo](#) and [Maren Klawiter](#) "have simply noted that the Cult of Pink Ribbons has diverted funds toward victims and away from research on cancer agents," Matthew Berglind and Cheryl Nakata wrote in "Cause-related marketing: More buck than bang?," a 2005 journal article. "There may be environmental causes for cancer, and identifying these substances would prevent the disease from occurring in the first place, thereby saving many more lives than treating the disease, after the fact. The American Cancer Society has been identified as especially complicit."

Nevertheless, A Crucial Catch organizers try to persuade consumers to adopt ACS' breast cancer awareness messages, and they project them via an NFL-sized marketing effort. Included are three ads posted on [NFL.com/Pink](#), featuring Fitzgerald, Saints quarterback Drew Brees, Giants quarterback Eli Manning and Jets quarterback Mark Sanchez.

Larry Fitzgerald and the NFL "A Crucial Catch" Campaign



These ads are important because, just as sports stars can persuade us to buy Gatorade and Nikes, research has shown they are effective at influencing consumers' beliefs and actions concerning our health. Fitzgerald's statement that "together with the NFL and the American Cancer Society, you can fight breast cancer and save lives," for example, is presented as an attempt by campaign organizers to induce us to contribute to the ACS' cause, and to accept and act on ACS' screening strategy.

Fitzgerald may be especially influential in projecting ACS messages because of his stellar reputation, standout play and a personal connection to breast cancer. His mother, Carol Fitzgerald, succumbed to the disease at 47 in 2003, when Larry Fitzgerald was at the University of Pittsburgh. His mother's death motivated him to work at his craft, he has told reporters, and to be active in the community to honor her. He started a foundation, the Carol Fitzgerald Memorial Fund.

Fitzgerald is surely doing what he thinks is morally responsible, but in addition to serving as an effective conduit for ACS messages, he also provides a bridge to drive revenues for the NFL and corporate partners. At the end of the ad, Fitzgerald directs viewers to NFL.com/Pink. Links embedded on that site take users to [pages where they may purchase](#) A Crucial Catch apparel.

This exemplifies the modern NFL. Commissioner Roger Goodell has set a league-wide revenue goal of \$25 billion by 2027, according to Quinn's book. Of course, a small portion of that money would be derived from selling breast cancer awareness products.

A Crucial Catch does not stand alone. Recent events have demonstrated cancer's employment as a disarming, influential vehicle within the sports media realm. Former cyclist Lance Armstrong and NFL linebacker Manti Te'o revealed earlier this year they had publicly promulgated embellished, false narratives with cancer involved: Armstrong maintained that he never used illegal performance-enhancing supplements after overcoming testicular cancer; Te'o preached his love for a leukemia victim who did not exist, then spoke about her publicly even after he discovered her nonexistence. Both athletes employed cancer as a shield to allay public scorn and skepticism; Armstrong also employed it as a weapon to attack detractors who accused him of cheating. Friends could not separate Armstrong "the actual person" from Armstrong "the cancer fighter," his former personal assistant, Mike Anderson, [told Sports Illustrated](#). He added: "That was done purposely. They threw up that cancer shield to defend him."

Fraudulent employment of the disease has become so widely recognizable that *Sports Illustrated* writer S.L. Price labels it "the cancer playbook." It's the read-option offense of the sports-media nexus: an emergent, popular scheme that does not yet have an effective counter. "Weren't we supposed to know better?" Price asked after Te'o and Armstrong publicly admitted their frauds. "It's no coincidence that each fraud employed cancer as a featured player. We are a pink-ribbon nation."

Weren't we supposed to know better? Should consumers targeted by A Crucial Catch not know better? Should we not be able to recognize

"the cancer playbook," to decipher the true primary motives of the NFL, ACS and the corporate partners within this visible, well-promoted cause-marketing campaign? Should we have the discipline to avoid buying pink NFL BCAM apparel, and to question the controversial messages of the ACS?

It is not that simple. By employing "cancer as a featured player" in this "pink-ribbon nation," A Crucial Catch organizers defend themselves from interrogation of their motives and disarm consumers of their skepticism. As Armstrong did, A Crucial Catch throws up a cancer shield to help deceive the public. And so, many of us cannot separate the NFL and its partners as "cancer fighters" from who they are: revenue- and image-driven forces of 21st-century America.

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A former staff writer with The Charlotte Observer, Ryan Basen conducted research of A Crucial Catch and cause marketing per his master's thesis. He has also written for The New York Times, The Washington Post and Charlotte Magazine, and now lives in the Washington, D.C., area.

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