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FOOD & LIFESTYLE

Retired NFL players leading big push for Checkers & Rally's in Birmingham



Checkers & Rally's Owner Donnell Thompson stands outside his new Midfield location!

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Two retired NFL players are sinking their teeth into the Birmingham restaurant market.

Donnell Thompson, who spent 11 seasons with the Indianapolis Colts, has purchased the Checkers & Rally's locations in the Birmingham market and is renovating them one by one. He is tackling the project with business partner Ron Wooten, also a retired NFL player who played for the New England Patriots.

The first location that will be up and running is the Midfield Rally's, which is located at 86 Weibel Drive. Thirty-five employees are currently training, and the location will

open Aug. 27.

"We have purchased the Birmingham market," Thompson said. "There are 12 stores here and we are remodeling and repositioning the 12 units. This is going to be our first unit we are opening and we are looking at Aug. 27 opening and feel real good about it."

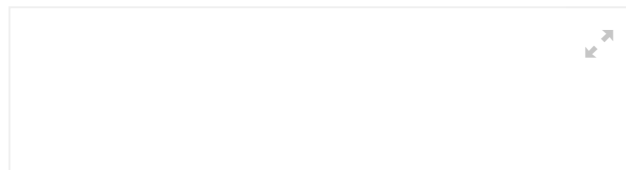
The second store slated for opening is in Bessemer. Thompson said they will then follow up with the Lomb Avenue or First Avenue North locations. A restaurant in Jasper is also being renovated.

"We're going to continue to succinctly do it one by one and do what's right by them," he said. "This market was such a good market – I felt like there was a former franchisee in the area that didn't see the value that I see. We value the guests and take care of the guests. That's what we're all about. The brand sells itself. I just thought this was an area where the brand has done good everywhere else its been and it can do good here."

While Thompson didn't disclose the financial investment he is making in reopening the dozen restaurants, he said he has put new roofs on five locations so far and invested in new HVAC systems, cooling units and more. The Midfield location has a brand new kitchen and current equipment.

"It takes quite a bit of funds to do this. We're going to invest at whatever level it needs to be invested in to serve the guests the proper way. If that means a total remodel, then that's what we're doing," he said.

Thompson, an Atlanta native, currently owns Denny's franchises in North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. He also used to own McDonald's and Zaxby's franchises. He said he is excited about the Checkers & Rally's brand because of its reputation for a good value at a good price. The chain focuses on burgers, including the Big Buford, chicken sandwiches, slushes, desserts and curly fries.





The Midfield Checkers & Rally's location is opening this month.

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He's also excited to be in the Birmingham region and to start at the Midfield location.

"I think this area is a real good area to do business in," he said. "Oftentimes it's overlooked by metropolitan Atlanta, and I think that when you dig deep and look at the area you see, wow, you have a city with 600,000-plus people overall or larger than that. When you look at the brands here – the closest brand to me is McDonald's that would be in the segment we're in. You have Sonics up the street. But, outside of that we're just as aware in this area as I think McDonald's is."

Thompson is also planning for the restaurants to be involved in the community, particularly with athletics. There will be free apple pies if teams win, sponsorships of teams, players of the game, give-back nights where a portion of sales are donated to schools and more. The location will also be open for groups to use for car washes.

Tampa-based Checkers & Rally's currently has nearly 900 restaurants nationwide and is aggressively expanding. It currently ranks No. 88 on Entrepreneur's 2019 Franchise 500 list.

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