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Sports Business

## Local restaurants support UH student-athletes in Braddahood and Sistahood Grindz program

UH football players at a launch event for this year's program in January

RYAN TANAKA



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For the past year, local entrepreneur Ryan Tanaka has been working to keep University of Hawaii athletes well-fed through Braddahood and Sistahood Grindz, an initiative he created to support student-athletes in collaboration with local restaurants.

He launched the program in the summer of 2022, initially for the UH football team during its offseason, in partnership with coach Timmy Chang. But before long, due to what Tanaka said was “overwhelming support” from local restaurants, he expanded the program to eight UH sports teams including men’s and women’s volleyball, men’s and women’s golf, women’s soccer, and men’s and women’s basketball, in addition to football. He said he also plans to add baseball next year.

Now the initiative is in its second year, which kicked off in January with an offseason program for football that runs through the end of July, with the other sports launching at different times throughout the year.

Here’s how it works: Participating restaurants take turns providing one meal per week to each team – including all of the players, as well as coaches and staff. All meals are donated by the restaurants.

Tanaka said he hopes the program can provide proper nutrition to the athletes and help the teams perform at their best.

“Offseason training is now supplemented by nutrition and community support and awareness, so what it does is that it helps to anchor these [players] – it motivates and inspires them to train harder,” he said. “Even if last season was tough, [this program shows] there is a whole community that believes in you and wants you to be successful.”

Tanaka is a serial entrepreneur who’s involved with several businesses. He is the founder of Island Business Management, an asset management company, and is the president of the investment arm of engineering firm KAI Hawaii. He’s also a part of the restaurant industry as the managing partner of Giovanni Pastrami Restaurant Group – a company comprised of Giovanni Pastrami, CJ’s and Round Table Pizza at Hilton Hawaiian Village. He also is the current chair of the Hawaii Restaurant Association. (For his work in the restaurant industry, Tanaka was recently named among this year’s honorees for PBN’s Pineapple Awards, which recognizes leaders in hospitality.)

Ryan Tanaka was recently named among this year’s honorees for PBN’s Pineapple Awards

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Tanaka said he’s been able to grow Braddahood and Sistahood Grindz through his connections within the industry and HRA.

He launched the initiative last year with three other members of HRA – Tom Jones of Gyotaku, Rick Nakashima of Ruby Tuesday Hawaii, and Mike Palmer of Kuhio Ave Food Hall. For this year’s program, 21 restaurants have signed on – some that Tanaka recruited, but many others that approached him after hearing about the initiative. Participating restaurants now include 100 Sails Restaurant & Bar, Big City Diner, Honolulu Burger Co., Murphy’s Bar & Grill, The Pizza Press, Zippy’s Restaurants, and more, as well as Tanaka’s Giovanni Pastrami.

“There’s been an outpouring of support, and it’s been remarkable because it shows that the community wants to rally around University of Hawaii athletics,” Tanaka said.

“The restaurants that have stepped forward, the owners are just very special individuals – they are selfless, they are giving,” he added. “The [businesses] might be struggling, but they see the greater good [in this program].”

Each restaurant provides a total of 250 meals throughout the year. Tanaka estimated that the total in-kind value of the program is about \$250,000 this year. That amount, he noted, includes a range of giveaways to players from various corporate sponsorship partners, as well as the donated meals. He also said that that figure will grow as he brings on more corporate sponsors.

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RYAN TANAKA

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As Tanaka sees it, one of the main values of the program is that it can help bolster recruitment for UH athletics. When prospective or existing players see the backing

Braddahood and Sistahood Grindz generates from local restaurants, sponsors and other community members, he said, it's a draw for players to choose or stay with UH.

"In my talks with the coaches, they love the program. For them, it's not free food, it's helping them with retention and recruiting," he said.

Tanaka noted that it's also a "win-win" for the participating businesses. As part of the initiative, Tanaka has entered into a Name, Image and Likeness agreement with each of the players, a policy that allows college athletes to earn income from their personal brands through endorsement deals or social media. Per the agreement for this program, the athletes are encouraged to post about their experience with Braddahood and Sistahood Grindz and help promote the participating restaurants via their personal social media accounts.

"The players have a job description – they are going to help thank and promote each of the corporate sponsors," Tanaka said.

"The market is changing where so much business is coming from social media, and these athletes have enormous followings," he added.

But from what the participating businesses say, they're less interested in how the program can boost business and more keen on simply encouraging the student-athletes.

Don Murphy, whose Murphy's Bar & Grill is among restaurants that provide meals for the program, estimated the total cost to his business to be around \$2,000, not including labor.

"The university is such an integral part of our community that we've got to support it," said Murphy, who has long been involved with UH athletics through other initiatives. "[Braddahood and Sistahood Grindz] gives them the knowledge that people out there care about them and are trying to help them out."

At a launch event for the program earlier this year, Lane Muraoka, the owner of Big City Diner, acknowledged that it's still a precarious time for the restaurant industry, with businesses facing many challenges – rising costs among them. But being a part of this program, he said, "is definitely worth it."

"It's all about the community ... and it's about helping each other," he said. "[These athletes] represent the state, they represent all of us. If we want them to succeed, we have to help them succeed – that's why I'm doing this, that's why all of these businesses are doing this."

In an email to PBN, representatives of Zippy's said the company wanted to participate "to show our support for Hawaii's home teams."

"The term 'support local' has been used a lot in recent years to show support for local restaurants and businesses, but the term is also translatable to those that represent our island home. We know that our student-athletes cannot compete to the best of their

ability without proper nutrition,” Zippy’s officials said. “Through these programs, we hope to not only feed the student-athletes with a delicious and nutritious meal but also serve as a reminder that no matter what, win or lose, we want to support them!”

Tanaka plans to expand the initiative to support the student-athletes in other ways. Moving forward, he said the program will focus more on career development for the athletes. One facet of this is a partnership with workforce development nonprofit ClimbHI to connect students with internships and jobs, as well as talks with professionals across industries and other learning opportunities. While some student-athletes may aim to go pro after college, he said, this is a way to help give them a viable backup plan.

“We’re going to be able to connect the student-athletes with employers on [ClimbHI’s] existing platform, and we can add our own employers, and more jobs, and more mentorships,” he said. “Career development is going to be a central focus.”