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**PRESS RELEASE**

**The Athlete's Foot Makes Commitment to Develop Next Generation of Black Franchise Owners, Diversify the Sneaker Industry**

*Announces StAART - Strategic African American Retail Track*

**ATLANTA** – April 27, 2021 - [The Athlete's Foot \(TAF\) USA](#) today announced the launch of its new signature program, **StAART**, which stands for Strategic African American Retail Track.

Its mission is to increase African American representation and ownership within the sneaker industry, particularly through franchising, while championing Black-owned retail and entrepreneurship within the Black community at-large.

The program directly addresses one of the greatest disparities in the industry.

“The data shows that Black people are the primary consumers and influencers of sneakers and athletic apparel but are not represented in positions of leadership or profit,” **said Darius Billings, senior director of product and marketing for The Athlete's Foot USA and the creator of StAART.** “We are on a mission to change that through StAART. We need more African American ownership within this industry that was built on Black culture and Black influence and within Black communities. Ownership is directly tied to wealth. If we can create more African American retail owners, the ripple effect in the industry and the community stands to be remarkable.”

Through StAART, The Athlete's Foot will directly recruit, develop and mentor Black entrepreneurs through its retail franchise model. The program will provide StAART franchisees with access to resources, systems, relationships with its strategic brand partners, and a mentorship network - directly addressing many of the barriers that typically prevent Black entrepreneurs from launching and successfully sustaining their businesses.

The Athlete's Foot, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, was the country's first athletic retail franchise and continues to be the only athletic specialty lifestyle retailer that operates solely under a franchise model, making it uniquely positioned to launch a program like StAART. All of its stores nationwide are independently owned and operated, with most operators owning multiple stores.

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## **Black Lives Matter Movement Sparks Idea for StAART**

The idea for StAART came to Billings in the summer of 2020, at the height of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

“The events of last summer spurred conversations with friends and family around the Black community’s challenges, opportunities and our legacy,” **said Billings**. “I knew in that moment I had a responsibility to find a way to use my platform to drive change. This isn’t performative or to check a box. It’s born out of my personal desire to effect change in an industry I love. That desire fortunately aligns with the vision, mission and values of The Athlete’s Foot. I’m grateful to work for a company that values its team enough to support it.”

Billings himself grew up in the sneaker industry and has seen its evolution. After graduating from Howard University, he began his career as a merchandiser for Nike before moving into a marketing career that landed him at TAF in 2008. Since joining TAF, his responsibilities include working directly with the company’s franchisees, supporting them from signing day and beyond. Because of his direct exposure to this aspect of the company, he was able to see the opportunity.

“We have seen the transformation that can happen in the life of the owner as well as in the communities they serve,” said Billings.

Billings offers, for example, TAF franchisee **Isom Lowman**. Lowman grew up watching his mother build multiple businesses and inevitably followed in her footsteps right after graduating Morehouse College.

“A classmate put me on to the stock market and I was able to use the money I made in stocks to put towards my first store at 22,” said Lowman, who will also be a StAART mentor. In his 20+ years as a franchisee, Lowman has opened more than 39 stores across the country, including one of the highest grossing TAF franchises in the world, located in Atlanta just blocks away from his alma mater, Morehouse.

## **Just the StAART: Inspiring the Next Generation**

But for Billings and The Athlete’s Foot, store ownership is only the beginning for StAART. In addition to recruiting and shepherding Black entrepreneurs through the program, TAF is on a mission to promote greater representation throughout the industry.

“StAART represents ownership in all facets,” **said Billings**. “Ownership of our ideas, influence and the culture. Through this program, we want to bring light to all of the different opportunities available within this billion-dollar industry that is still largely driven and influenced by Black culture and consumers.”

One example is TAF’s partnership with Black-owned, Atlanta-based creative agency Tantrum Agency to develop an in-school curriculum in Sports X Retail X Entrepreneurship beginning with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public School System. North Carolina is one of TAF’s most populated retail markets. The curriculum will introduce the various careers in the industry, such as design, buying and merchandising to the support services that are needed, such as accounting, construction and architecture.

“While we believe it’s important to reach college students and support HBCUs, which we will do, we see it as a missed opportunity to not make an attempt to reach kids and youth sooner. Exposure is key, and the sooner they can become exposed, the better,” **said Billings**.

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TAF has curated a StAART advisory council that includes key influencers within the sneaker industry as well as professional and community organizations that can lend additional support in making StAART a success.

For example, The Athlete's Foot has forged a partnership with **Citizen's Trust Bank** (CTB), one of the largest African American owned financial institutions in the nation.

Through the partnership, StAART participants will have direct access to Citizen's Trust's small business programs and products, addressing one of the traditional barriers to success for entrepreneurs: lack of access to capital. The two companies will also work together to provide free financial literacy programming to young adults, equipping them with the tools needed to acquire, build and sustain wealth, a pillar of StAART. Additionally, CTB's Vice President of Strategy and Business Development, Adrienne White, will serve on the Advisory Council.

The StAART program will officially launch April 27. Those interested in learning more, applying or becoming a StAART partner can visit [staart.us](http://staart.us) for information.

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**About The Athlete's Foot:** The Athlete's Foot is more than just a retail store; it's a destination for athletic street style. At TAF, we want to be known for encouraging our customers to break the rules and explore the unexpected. We are also a heritage brand rooted in American sneaker culture. Our founders, Robert and David Lando, opened the first TAF store in 1971 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Athlete's Foot was new and bold: the first athletic specialty store of its kind. Today, TAF is represented around the globe. We do more than sell athletic gear: we curate items that celebrate an active lifestyle. We are community-driven, locally relevant, and globally known.