

# Enhancing the 2026 NFL Draft Experience in East Liberty, Pittsburgh

Prepared for  
The 2026 Draft

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## Executive Summary

As Pittsburgh prepares to host the 2026 NFL Draft, the city has been given a unique opportunity to create a memorable and inclusive experience that benefits both residents and visitors. To support this goal, our team proposes three off-site activities located in East Liberty to boost attendee engagement during the Draft. East Liberty is a vibrant neighborhood located on the east end of Pittsburgh, known for its cultural diversity, revitalization efforts, and active community. These activities include the East Liberty Wellness Retreat, the Draft Day Fitness Challenge, and the East Liberty Draft Day Party. Each event is designed to increase fan engagement, promote health and wellness, and strengthen community connections.

In addition, we recommend partnering with ThinkFirst, a national nonprofit focused on brain and spinal injury prevention. Through this partnership, we can incorporate educational resources, interactive programs, and community outreach that align with the NFL's commitment to health, safety, and youth engagement. ThinkFirst brings extensive expertise and knowledge in concussion education as well as programs designed to raise awareness about injury prevention, which would be a perfect addition to the NFL Draft activities.

## Introduction

The NFL Draft has evolved from a simple player selection process into a multi-day spectacle that brings national attention, economic activity, and community engagement to its host cities. With Pittsburgh selected as the host for the 2026 NFL Draft, the town stands at a critical moment to not only welcome visitors but to meaningfully involve its neighborhoods in the experience.

The NFL and the Pittsburgh Steelers have expressed clear goals for the event to promote youth wellness, showcase the region's football legacy, and leave a lasting, positive impact on the local

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community. These goals align with a growing emphasis on equity and inclusion in event planning, ensuring that the benefits of high-profile moments are felt beyond downtown venues and across diverse communities.

East Liberty, a neighborhood currently undergoing significant redevelopment and revitalization, presents a compelling opportunity for off-site programming that reflects the city's modern identity and cultural richness. With a population of around 6,000–7,000 residents and a median age of 34, the community is young, vibrant, and eager to engage. Its central location just five miles from downtown Pittsburgh, combined with easy public transportation access, makes it an ideal extension of the Draft's footprint. From its historic Presbyterian churches to modern anchors like Bakery Square and the Kelly Strayhorn Theater, East Liberty blends legacy with innovation, offering a welcoming, diverse, and high-visibility platform for community-centered programming during the 2026 Draft.

This report responds to the challenge of transforming the NFL Draft from a downtown-centric event into a citywide celebration. Grounded in both research and community insight, the recommendations that follow aim to engage fans, uplift local voices, and help Pittsburgh set a new standard for what it means to host a major sporting event.

## Strategies

We focused on strategies that extend the excitement of the Draft into surrounding communities, making the event more inclusive and impactful. We can better understand local needs and deliver resonating programming by prioritizing neighborhood-based outreach. Education plays a key role- teaching healthier habits, raising awareness about injury prevention, or promoting youth development.

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Equally important is accessibility. Our events are designed to be walk-up friendly, free to attend, and welcoming to all ages. While some initiatives aim to inspire long-term change, others provide immediate value by connecting residents with resources, support networks, and meaningful experiences that foster community pride.

## Nonprofit

The ThinkFirst National Injury Prevention Foundation, founded in 1986, is a nonprofit organization that specializes in and is dedicated to preventing brain, spinal cord, and other serious injuries through education, research, and advocacy. Established by neurosurgeons Dr. Fletcher Eyster and Dr. Clark Watts, ThinkFirst's initiatives have become nationally recognized with programs led by medical professionals and injury survivors. These programs provide valuable insight on concussion awareness, injury prevention, and the long term impact of head trauma, making ThinkFirst an essential partner.

As the NFL continues to emphasize concussion prevention, youth safety, and overall health and wellness, ThinkFirst aligns closely with the NFL's mission. The nonprofits expertise in brain and spinal cord injury prevention makes them an ideal partner for the NFL's community initiatives. By partnering with ThinkFirst, the NFL can further educate young athletes, parents, coaches, and communities on injury prevention and concussion awareness and injury prevention.

## Recommendations

### #1 East Liberty Wellness Retreat

To deepen community engagement during the 2026 NFL Draft, we propose the East Liberty Community Wellness Retreat, developed in collaboration with ThinkFirst, our nonprofit alliance

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focused on preventing brain and spinal cord injuries through education, advocacy, and community outreach. This retreat is planned to take place in the Peace, Love & Zen Holistic Wellness Center, a beautiful venue located in the heart of East Liberty. This center's Himalayan Salt Cave will serve as a focal point for the experience, offering guests a space for reflection, restoration, and learning. Activities will include guided meditation sessions, gentle yoga classes, breathwork circles, creative journaling workshops, live acoustic performances, and a *ThinkFirst* educational booth centered on brain health and youth safety. The booth will feature concussion awareness materials, interactive demonstrations, and take-home resources for parents, athletes, and coaches.

This event is ultimately designed to be relaxing, educational, and accessible for all. Guests will be able to walk in at any time, stay as long as they wish, and engage in the activities at their own pace. Seating, refreshments, and soft music will create a very calm and relaxing atmosphere that encourages mindfulness and self-care.

This retreat directly supports the NFL's broader community outreach, youth education, and fan engagement goals. It also adds dimension to the overall Draft experience by offering a slower, more reflective space where families, young athletes, and casual fans can all participate in meaningful ways. To strengthen the connection to the NFL, the retreat will also include guest appearances by former Steelers players and athletic trainers, who will share insights about injury prevention, wellness routines, and life beyond the game.

This event stands out because it shifts the focus from spectacle to substance. It is rooted in East Liberty's identity as a neighborhood committed to growth, healing, and inclusion. Also, it is inspired by ThinkFirst's mission to educate through empathy and experience. Most importantly, it gives the NFL Draft an incredible opportunity to impact lives beyond football.

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Admission will be free and open to all. All events and activities will be family-friendly and trauma-informed. By pairing wellness with education, and local energy with national purpose, the East Liberty Wellness Retreat creates a Draft Week experience that will be remembered not for the noise but for the way it made people feel seen, safe, and supported. This feeling will continue long after Draft Week ends.

### #2: Draft Day Fitness Challenge

To enhance fan engagement during the 2026 NFL Draft in Pittsburgh, our team proposes a Draft Day Fitness Challenge. It will be a free, family-friendly event inviting fans of all ages to participate in athletic activities modeled after the NFL Combine. Hosted on the historic field in front of the Cathedral of Learning, formerly Forbes Field, this outdoor event would feature drills such as the 40-yard dash, an agility ladder course, and a quarterback accuracy challenge. In addition to a scaled-down competition for the children, local athletic trainers would be on-site to guide participants and offer fitness advice. At the same time, nearby food trucks and small giveaways contribute to the festive atmosphere.

This event aims to turn spectators into participants by offering them a fun, hands-on way to engage with the NFL Draft beyond watching player selections. By incorporating elements of movement, competition, and community, the Draft Day Fitness Challenge reflects the NFL's larger objectives of youth development, character building, and health promotion. Its simplicity and accessibility also ensure that a wide range of attendees, from aspiring athletes to casual fans, can take part.

The Fitness Challenge aligns particularly well with the NFL's Play 60 initiative, which encourages kids to be active for at least an hour a day. By giving children and teens a chance to

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run drills, test their speed, and interact with fitness mentors, this event does not just promote this goal; it *activates* it. The NFL has consistently emphasized the need to combat childhood inactivity and obesity through movement-based outreach, and the Draft Day Fitness Challenge is an opportunity to model that commitment.

Beyond promoting physical activity, the event also contributes to personal development and fan loyalty. Physical challenges (even in a casual setting) cultivate discipline, sportsmanship, and confidence, values that the NFL upholds, especially among the youth. At the same time, when fans are invited to participate rather than passively observe, their overall event experience becomes more meaningful. This strengthens emotional connections to the team and the sport, an important factor in long-term brand engagement. "In fact, over 63% of global sports fans report feeling" a strong emotional connection to their favorite team, a connection that often becomes part of their personal identity (Glover). Events like the Draft Day Fitness Challenge amplify this connection by creating shared moments that strengthen loyalty through lived experience.

### #3 East Liberty Draft Party

The East Liberty Draft Party is designed as a large-scale, open-air community festival that brings the excitement and inclusivity of the NFL Draft directly into the heart of one of Pittsburgh's most dynamic neighborhoods. Set to take place in Enright Park, a centrally located and walkable green space in East Liberty, the event prioritizes accessibility, family engagement, and local economic participation. As part of the larger Draft Week programming, this event aims to create a festive and welcoming environment where residents, families, and visitors can gather to celebrate not just football but neighborhood pride.

The layout of the event is intentionally multifaceted, with key zones that reflect both recreational

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and educational objectives. The main attraction will be a live outdoor screening of the NFL Draft, providing real-time excitement and shared experience under the open sky. Surrounding the viewing area will be a curated selection of food trucks and vendors, featuring East Liberty-based businesses and restaurants to stimulate local commerce and introduce visitors to the neighborhood's culinary identity. Live music performances, DJ sets, and spoken word artists from the local arts community will add cultural depth and vibrancy to the celebration.

A dedicated Steelers Fan Zone will offer interactive activities such as photo booths, mini football games, and team merchandise. At the same time, a Family Zone will feature face painting, lawn games, and picnic seating, ensuring the event remains multigenerational and welcoming. At the core of the Draft Party's public health and education mission is our nonprofit partner, ThinkFirst, which will host a health and safety learning area. This booth will include VR concussion simulations, helmet safety demonstrations, and a "Safe Play" trivia zone, providing valuable injury prevention resources in an engaging, hands-on format. A \$10 entry fee for participation in these educational activities will be requested, with proceeds directly supporting youth injury prevention initiatives. This fee structure supports ThinkFirst's academic mission and contributes to the event's financial sustainability, ensuring similar programming can continue in future seasons.

By combining entertainment, education, and equity-focused design, the East Liberty Draft Party reflects the goals of the NFL Draft in a hyperlocal context. It transforms the Draft from a spectator event into a participatory community experience. The planning prioritizes neighborhood integration, supports small business ecosystems, and centers on youth safety and wellness, ensuring a lasting impact on the East Liberty community and the broader Pittsburgh region.

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## Conclusion

This proposal should be selected because it transforms the 2026 NFL Draft from a one-time spectacle into a meaningful, community-centered experience. Rather than focusing solely on downtown fanfare, our plan strategically extends the Draft's reach into East Liberty, one of Pittsburgh's most dynamic and diverse neighborhoods- ensuring that the event delivers value where it's most needed.

Our recommendations go beyond entertainment. They offer a clear blueprint for how the NFL can meet its stated goals of youth engagement, wellness promotion, and community impact. The East Liberty Wellness Retreat creates a space for education and reflection around brain health and injury prevention. The Draft Day Fitness Challenge gets kids moving while also promoting Play 60 values. Finally, the East Liberty Draft Party drives local business participation and neighborhood pride, while embedding critical safety education through our partnership with ThinkFirst.

What sets this proposal apart is its balance of ambition and practicality. Every event is free or low-cost, walk-up friendly, and rooted in local partnerships, making it scalable and sustainable. It's not just about adding programming, it's about embedding purpose into every part of Draft Week. Selecting this proposal means choosing a model for how major events can create lasting, equitable impact. It gives Pittsburgh the chance to set a new standard for the NFL and future host cities- one where the excitement of the Draft strengthens communities, not just brands.

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