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Two Economies on Game Day: Chicago's Licensed Jerseys and the Hometown Designers Who Dress the Tailgate

By William Maxey (BrothaMax) · CultureTechLens NFP

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Stand in a Soldier Field parking lot on a Sunday morning and read what people are wearing the way this publication reads everything: as a record, with the receipts attached. You will see two economies sharing one tailgate.

The first economy is the licensed one — the navy jersey with the name stitched by the official licensee, the throwback Walter Payton and Devin Hester legacy jerseys made by Mitchell & Ness, the fitted cap made under a league licence. This economy is real, it is big, and almost none of it is from here. The money travels up a licensing chain that starts in a parking lot on the South Side lakefront and lands in corporate offices in other cities.

The second economy dresses the same fan from the side the TV cameras miss. Its headquarters, for more than twenty years, has been a Chicago shop that started at an address so rooted it took the address for a name: **Leaders 1354**, opened by Corey Gilkey in 2002 at 1354 East 53rd Street in Hyde Park, today at 1152 West Madison. Look at Leaders' own fitted-cap catalogue — checked for this piece — and you find the city's game-day language translated into product: *The Suhey* for the Bears, named for fullback Matt Suhey; a *Game 7 Pack* for the Bulls; *Lemon Pepper* for the White Sox; *Crown Passed Down* for the Cubs. These are not league logos. They are Chicago memory, cut into a fitted. The same shop legitimately stocks the first economy too — Mitchell & Ness jerseys hang in its catalogue — which is exactly the point: one Chicago storefront holds both economies in the same rack, and a fan can see, side by side, what a licence buys and what a hometown buys.

And the hometown economy compounds. A young West Side designer named Joseph Robinson interned at Leaders, learned the floor, and in 2014 co-founded Fat Tiger Workshop with fellow Chicago designers. The brand that grew out of that shop floor — **Joe Freshgoods** — went on to a run of New Balance collaborations beginning in February 2020 that made him one of the most sought-after creative voices in sneakers, and his collaboration list reaches all the way to the Chicago Bears themselves. The kid who learned retail inside the second economy now gets called by the first one. That pipeline — Hyde Park shop floor to global collaboration — is not an accident of talent. It is what a local design institution does when it survives long enough to train somebody.

So here is the tailgate question, and it is an assignment question, not a lament: on a Bears Sunday, Chicago fans spend real money to say who they are. **How much of that money stays in the neighborhoods that created the language on the caps?** No public count answers that today — the leagues publish their licensing totals, not the neighbourhood split — and a number nobody counts is a number nobody has to answer for. Counting it is journalism. It is also, not incidentally, the "New Product Zone" question stood on its head: the newest product in the building matters less than the oldest question in the parking lot — whose name is on the license, whose name is on the label, and whose block the register sits on.

Chicago already knows how to build the second economy. It has been open since 2002, at an address it refuses to take out of its name.

Sources

- Leaders 1354 (ldrs1354.com) — store catalogue checked 2026-11-11: "The Suhey (Bears) Fitted," "Game 7 Pack Bulls fitted," "Lemon Pepper (White Sox) Fitted," "Crown Passed Down (Cubs) Fitted"; Mitchell & Ness Derrick Rose, Devin Hester, and Walter Payton legacy jerseys stocked; store at 1152 W. Madison St., Chicago.
- Choose Chicago interview with Leaders 1354 owners Corey Gilkey and Diego Ross (via ldrs1354.com) — opened 2002 in Hyde Park at 1354 E. 53rd St. (the address in the name); Bronzeville and Wicker Park chapters; mentorship mission.
- EventNoire (2022, updated 2025) — Corey Gilkey launched Leaders in 2002 in Hyde Park; the shop as an epicentre of Chicago streetwear and a mentorship resource.
- Business of Fashion, BoF 500 profile of Joseph Robinson — Chicago-based creative director of Joe Freshgoods; West Side upbringing; early retail at

Leaders; co-established Fat Tiger Workshop in 2014 with Terrell Jones, Vic Lloyd, and Desmond Owusu; New Balance collaborations from 2020.
- House of Heat (July 2025) — since February 2020, Robinson's New Balance partnership totals 10 projects and 20 sneaker releases.
- Community Goods (communitygoods.squarespace.com) — Joseph Robinson board biography listing collaborations with brands "as varied as McDonald's, the Chicago Bears, and New Balance."

Reporting note: no figure is printed for total Chicago game-day merchandise spending or its local share, because no verified public count exists as of publication. Stating the gap is deliberate — CTL does not invent numbers.

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