The familiar orange box and the timeless slogan “Wheaties – The Breakfast of Champions” has made Wheaties a genuine American icon and a metaphor for greatness and success.

Athletes, many of them legends in their sports, have said that being featured on the Wheaties box is a dream come true. And, indeed, Wheaties is a delicious, healthy product that has helped fuel and inspire many a champion.

But the legend and lore of this famous brand – and the many champions it has featured over the years – is a story in itself.

The Invention

Like many great inventions, Wheaties was discovered by accident. In 1921, a health clinician in Minneapolis was mixing a batch of bran gruel for his patients when he spilled some of the mix on a hot stove. The gruel crackled and sizzled into a crisp flake. Tasting the very first Wheaties prototype, he decided this delicious accident had promise.

He brought the crisped gruel to the people at the Washburn Crosby Company where the head miller, George Cormack, took on the challenge of strengthening the flakes to prevent them from turning to dust inside a cereal box. Cormack tested 36 varieties of wheat before he developed the perfect flake.

A companywide contest was held to name the new cereal. The winner was Jane Bausman, the wife of the export manager. Wheaties was chosen over numerous other entries, including Nutties and Gold Medal Wheat Flakes.
Wheaties Enters the Sports Arena

The Wheaties association with sports began in 1933, nine years after the cereal was introduced. General Mills marketing maverick Sam Gale was walking through a neighborhood on a beautiful autumn day and noticed that most families were indoors. When he discovered that they were listening to the World Series on the radio, he recognized a new opportunity to advertise Wheaties. Gale’s vision began with the sponsorship of baseball broadcasts, evolved into featuring athletes on the box, and the creation of hero “Jack Armstrong — All American Boy.”

One of the most popular slogans in advertising history was penned later that same year. General Mills’ contract for sponsorship of the broadcasts of Minneapolis Millers games on WCCO radio included a large advertising signboard at the ball park. Knox Reeves, an advertising executive on the Wheaties account at a Minneapolis-based agency, was asked what should be printed on the sign. He took out a pad and pencil, sketched a Wheaties box, thought for a moment, and then printed “Wheaties - The Breakfast of Champions.”

Wheaties baseball broadcasts were immensely popular throughout the 1930s. Originally on just one station, they expanded to encompass 95, spreading to teams and cities throughout the country. One of those stations was WHO in Des Moines, Iowa, where a young broadcaster named Ronald “Dutch” Reagan entered and won a contest for broadcasters. His prize was a trip to Hollywood, all expenses paid, courtesy of Wheaties. He never returned ... but that’s another story.

Athlete testimonials were a key part of the “Breakfast of Champions” broadcast package. Some of the stars endorsing Wheaties through the years include: Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, Jackie Robinson, Bob Feller, Hank Greenberg, Stan Musial, Ted Williams, Yogi Berra, Mickey Mantle and Johnny Bench. To get a flavor of Wheaties pervasiveness - 46 of the 51 players selected for the 1939 Major League All-Star Game endorsed Wheaties at the time.

Not all of the celebrities were “real” people, however. The radio characters Jack Armstrong and his companion Betty Fairfield were featured on Wheaties packages in the early and mid-1930s. They were depicted performing a variety of activities such as skiing, playing tennis, golf and basketball.

The popularity of Wheaties spread to other sports. Testimonials by great, non-fictional athletes like Jack Dempsey, Sonja Henie and Johnny Weissmuller made their fans aware of the “Breakfast of Champions.”
Some of the testimonials were unsolicited. In 1950, for example, when a 22-year-old Trenton, N.J., man hoisted a 2,700-pound elephant and his trainer on his back, with 3,000 people watching, he was quoted as saying, “I guess there’s only one thing I eat every day - Wheaties.”

A New Marketing Approach

In the early 1950s, Wheaties took a new marketing approach. The company moved away from sports and into the children’s market, associating Wheaties with the Lone Ranger and the Mickey Mouse Club. More youngsters began eating Wheaties, but not enough to offset the decline in adult consumption.

Sports and Fitness

In 1956, Wheaties returned to sports and physical fitness with strong, new marketing strategies. Wheaties hired spokesman Bob Richards, a two-time Olympic pole vaulting champion and a well-known crusader for fitness. Another successful strategy was the return of Wheaties to sports television, including pioneering sponsorship of pre- and post-game shows. The establishment of the Wheaties Sports Federation was another successful step in supporting and promoting fitness.

Throughout the years, Wheaties has remained the “Breakfast of Champions,” and nothing shows this better than the brand’s 75th anniversary celebration. Consumers were asked to vote for their favorite Wheaties champion of all-time, and Wheaties celebrated its anniversary by re-releasing the original packages featuring the Wheaties champions selected by the American public. The top 10 vote recipients are: Michael Jordan, Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, Mary Lou Retton, Tiger Woods, Cal Ripken Jr., Walter Payton, John Elway, Jackie Robinson and the 1980 U.S. Men’s Olympic Hockey Team.

So remember...you are not merely eating cereal when you pour a bowl of Wheaties. At that moment, you are sharing in the “Breakfast of Champions” with many of the most legendary athletes in sports history.