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Friday, March 28, 2008

Big games, big payoff

Detroit to reap up to \$14M from NCAA, Tigers, Wings

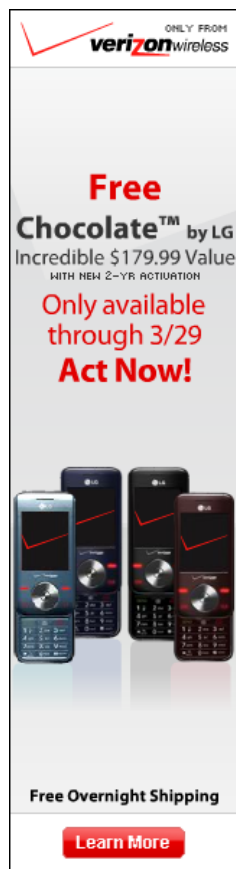
Louis Aguilar and Jennifer Youssef / The Detroit News

Big games in a big city that needs a big-time boost are playing out in downtown Detroit during the next four days, with tens of thousands of sports fans ready to cheer -- and ready to spend.

The combination of the NCAA Midwest Regional men's college basketball tournament at Ford Field today and Sunday, plus the Tigers Opening Day on Monday and two Red Wings home games, adds up to a blockbuster payoff for Metro Detroit.

A rough estimate says the games will give the region an [economic](#) shot in the arm worth \$10 million to \$14 million.

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Hoops-crazed fans from Kansas, Wisconsin, Villanova, Pa., and Davidson, N.C., began arriving in droves Thursday, filling Metro Detroit hotels, casinos, bars, restaurants, corporate parties and buying at least 56,000 tickets for the games at Ford Field. Previous cities that hosted the NCAA Midwest Regional say the weekend pumped \$3 million to \$10 million into their local economies. But Detroit already has broken the record attendance, with the 56,625 tickets sold as of Thursday morning, for a NCAA regional, which means a potentially bigger payoff.

Meanwhile, the Tigers' Opening Day, always an unofficial local holiday, could have at least at \$4.1 million effect on downtown -- the equivalent of a Major League Baseball first-round playoff game, according to the Anderson Economic Group in Lansing.

"This is what cities are all about, big games and unique experiences," said Scott Grigg, director of public relations at MGM Grand Detroit. Grigg said the casino's hotel bookings are far above normal for this time of year and its highly rated restaurants, such as Saltwater and the Wolfgang Puck Grille, are breaking a record for reservations.

Past success counts

Big shots and corporate types are paying from \$5,000 to \$14,000 for a suite at Ford Field. That's on top of hundreds or even thousands more for tickets, hotels, meals and parties.

Part of the reason is Detroit's success in hosting big games in the past, including Super Bowl XL in 2006 and the 2006 Major League Baseball All-Star Game.

TSE Sports & Entertainment is selling corporate packages for the NCAA games priced from \$500 to \$12,000.

"Detroit proved it knows how to play ball with Super Bowl XL and the All-Star Game," said Randall Tuchman, president of TSE, "so the weekend packages are selling better than we expected."

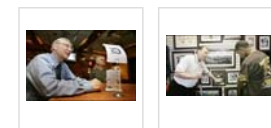
This regional finals at Ford Field are a warm-up for next year, when the NCAA's much bigger Final Four comes to town.

On the professional sports scene, the Tigers have sold a record number of season tickets for Comerica Park, with many weekend games sold out, and both the Pistons and the Red Wings already have sealed



Dan DeLaby, left, and Barney Olesko watch sports at Mario's in Detroit. An ad on their table touts specials for the Tigers home opener. (Brandy Baker / The Detroit News)

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playoff spots in their respective leagues.

Pro sports appears to be one of the few luxuries Metro Detroiters are willing to open their pocketbooks for these days. The money fans plunk down as they watch the Wings, Pistons and Tigers on TV at their local restaurant or sports bar or to buy the latest Justin Verlander souvenir jersey has been a godsend to businesses struggling through tough times.

But it's the Tigers that are the local favorites of the moment.

One restaurant -- Mario's in Detroit and Troy -- is advertising \$50 to \$90 packages for Tigers games that include tickets, a "grand buffet" and shuttle service to and from the park.

Brian King, owner of Sports Authentics Inc. in Rochester Hills, said that in the three years his store has been open, he's seen a 50 percent jump in sales, mainly because of Tigers fever.

In fact, the Tigers are so popular that sales of their souvenirs and apparel rank second in Major League Baseball this year, right behind the New York Yankees, according to SportsOne Source, a market research company that tracks sales of sports merchandise. The Tigers even beat World Champion Boston Red Sox, who come in third.

The team's recent success, after years of lingering near the bottom of the league, explains the popularity of the team's merchandise, said Matt Powell a SportsOne Source analyst.

"When teams have not fared well for years and finally do well, sales go way up," Powell said. "When the Tigers took off in 2006, they were a long-suffering team and people were excited."

Among the local retailers benefiting from the frenzy is the Varsity Shop in Birmingham. Owner Marc Secontine said that when the Tigers went to the World Series in 2006, his sales were the strongest in the company's 52-year history.

"For 20 years, it wasn't cool to like the Tigers," Secontine said. "Now they're coming out of the woodwork."

Expecting playoff fever

There hasn't been a big spike in [business](#) from Wings and Pistons fans, but Secontine said he expects that to change as the playoffs approach. He said the same thing is happening with college basketball merchandise: there hasn't been a mad rush for those items, but that could change if the Michigan State Spartans make it to the Final Four.

Smack in the middle of the madness this weekend will be Cheli's Chili Bar near Ford Field and Comerica Park. Given that owner Chris Chelios is a University of Wisconsin alum, the bar will be home turf for the legion of Badger fans hitting Motown.

Carl Utess of Lansing and his father will be among those heading to Detroit for the action. They'll drive to the city both Friday and Sunday to watch the basketball games at Ford Field. Before and after, their plans include hitting the casinos, eating at Cheli's and attending as many pep rallies as they can find.

While they don't plan to stay overnight, they will be dropping a few bucks while they're here.

Utess, 26, said he bought the "cheap-o tickets" for \$45 each for both days and expects to spend another \$100 on food. How much he and his father spend at the casino is up for grabs.

Utess said he enjoys coming to Detroit for big events like the NCAA tourney.

"I think Detroit is trying to be a touristy area and they are doing it the right way."

You can reach Louis Aguilar at (313) 222-2760 or laguilar@detnews.com.

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