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Detroit Tigers have big-league impact on Michigan's economy, optimism

Posted by [Nathan Bomey](#) | [Business Review](#) April 03, 2008 07:01AM
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Mark Bialek

Fans line up for tickets at Comerica Park on Detroit Tigers Opening Day.

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 This is Detroit? This is Michigan? The hope and optimism surrounding the Detroit Tigers' 108th Opening Day game Monday was palpable downtown.

Hope and optimism. Not synonymous words with the state right now.

But the struggling Michigan economy and the scandalous political landscape in Detroit didn't have tickets to this game. Some 44,934 fans did, marking an all-time record at Comerica Park.

This is Detroit. This is Michigan.

The bulked up Tigers lost 5-4 in 11 innings to the Kansas City Royals in a chilly pre-April affair, and although the outcome was disappointing, the victorious and joyous atmosphere was a polar opposite of the gloomy mood throughout the state about, it seems at times, virtually everything else.

Can the optimism and positivity emanating from Woodward Avenue reverberate throughout the state? Or is it not relevant to the economic struggles the state is going through and the political troubles in Detroit?

To Doug Rothwell, president of the economic development group Detroit Renaissance, the Tigers are playing an important role in presenting a positive image of the city to the world.

"Having successful sports franchises, not just the Tigers, but the Red Wings and the Pistons, constantly keeps us in a positive light out there," Rothwell said.

What are the Detroit Tigers worth to Detroit?

Opening Day: \$4.54 million.
Regular season: \$117.3 million.

Visitors to the ballpark: Over 3 million forecast in 2008.

Sources: Anderson Economic Group, Detroit Tigers

Lessons from the Tigers

Perhaps it's a stretch, but comparisons between the Tigers and the state of Michigan can be made.



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The Tigers were down and out, having lost 11 consecutive seasons through 2005. Attitudes about the team were constantly negative and losses seemed inevitable.

But ownership gradually made key investments in the team, attracting marquee players like All-Star catcher Ivan Rodriguez and outfielder Magglio Ordonez.

The Tigers vaulted into the World Series in 2006 and barely missed the playoffs in 2007. This year, the team is widely expected to compete for the Central Division title, likely advancing to the playoffs and possibly even the World Series.

Michigan, and certainly Detroit, are by some accounts in the same place the Tigers were during their losing stretch. Unemployment levels are high, automotive jobs are evaporating, and the public perception of the economic circumstances is low.

Can Michigan and Detroit come back like the Tigers?
Rothwell says yes.

"It really is a metaphor in many cases for the rebirth of Detroit," he said. "It's a great morale boost for the people in the community. I think they're very symbolic of the comeback in the community."

Playing an economic role

From a financial standpoint, the Tigers are doing their part to contribute to the local economy.

The team already has sold more than 2.625 million tickets, said Rob Matwick, Tigers' vice president for communications. That would equal the third-largest attendance in team history.

The Tigers expect to sell out many games this season, en route to likely breaking the team's all-time attendance record and topping 3 million in total attendance, Matwick said.

Meanwhile, two unrelated reports pinpoint the economic impact of Opening Day and the Tigers' season:

- The East Lansing-based Anderson Economic Group estimates spending by fans attending Tigers games this year will generate a net economic impact on the metro Detroit area of \$117.3 million. That figure - which doesn't account for some activity, such as Tigers jersey sales - is nearly 2-1/2 times bigger than the estimated economic impact of the 2006 Super Bowl in Detroit, estimated at \$49.3 million.
- The Detroit Regional Chamber, which used different methodology than the Anderson Economic Group, estimated that the season would have an economic impact of more than \$277 million.

Anderson estimated that each game would have a net impact of about \$1.45 million - although Opening Day was expected to give the region a \$4.54 million boost.

"Opening day is more of an event. It's more of a one-time annual rite of spring," said Scott Watkins, a consultant for Anderson. "There's not a whole lot you can substitute for going to Opening Day. It's one of those things people are willing to spend a little more money on that maybe they wouldn't have spent."

The Tigers are important, Watkins said, because they provide people with a local entertainment option.

Expectations are high

The enthusiasm surrounding the Tigers has been building over the winter as the team acquired star third baseman Miguel Cabrera, pitcher Dontrelle Willis and shortstop Edgar Renteria in off-season trades. With the acquisitions, fans are hoping the team can return to the post-season this year, after missing the playoffs in 2007.

Dan Streetman, a fan from Clawson, said the vibrancy associated with Opening Day would continue throughout the season.

"Obviously with the expectations of this year it's going to be a huge boost," he said. "Already with the tickets sold, it's going to be packed."

Anderson Economic Group expects per-fan spending at games to be slightly down this year because of concerns about the economy.

Fans like Dave Sutter of Chesterfield don't necessarily have plans to scale back.

Sutter, who described the Tigers as a "hard-working team, kind of like the city," was enjoying the Opening Day atmosphere and sipping a beer at 9:55 a.m. at Hockeytown Cafe across the street from Comerica Park. The restaurant was buzzing, and restaurant officials said there were already more than 200 people there.

Sutter said he bought two tickets for the game for a total of \$100 on eBay - "which is probably less than most people paid."

"And probably," he said with a laugh, he'll dish out "another hundred bucks on beer."

The Tigers and the next-door Detroit Lions will continue to support a burgeoning district of restaurants and entertainment venues that encouraged the NFL to hold the 2006 Super Bowl in Detroit and prompted the NCAA to schedule the 2009 Final Four for Ford Field.

"Having a stadium district like you have in downtown Detroit with Ford Field and Comerica Park and that being adjacent to the theater district with the Fox, that really has allowed business in that area to sustain itself throughout the course of a year," Watkins said. "If you didn't have one or the other down there ... a lot of those establishments simply would not survive."

The economic impact is felt throughout the region, because employees of the two teams and workers at the surrounding restaurants pump their paychecks into the Southeast Michigan economy.

"That employs people in the downtown area. Those people then have money to spend at other businesses in that area and beyond, going into the suburbs," Watkins said. "And it really does provide a nice stimulus for the economic growth in that area."

The Tigers, the Detroit Pistons and the Detroit Red Wings are generating positive, powerful buzz.

The players recognize it, too.

"Since I've been here, I think this is a sports city, just looking at it from all aspects - football, basketball, baseball and hockey," said Tigers designated hitter Gary Sheffield. "This city is exciting for sports, and I'm just glad to be a part of it."

Taking spotlight off scandal

The political circumstances in the city of Detroit - where Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick faces eight felony charges in connection with his sworn denial of an affair with his chief of staff - weren't reflected in the jubilant Tigers crowd.

The charges won't go away. The scandal won't go away. But for at least a day, the Tigers stole the spotlight.

"There's no doubt that I think we play a part in lifting the spirits of people in Michigan and Detroit right now," said Matwick, the Tigers' communications executive.

This town is eager for another World Series championship - the last two came in 1968 and 1984. But the yearning for an economic revival may usurp athletic aspirations.

Or perhaps, in some sense, the two are intertwined.

"We're celebrating the 40th anniversary of the '68 championship. ... The Tigers in '68 were a great unifying force in the city and pulled people together," Matwick said of that tumultuous year.

"Boy, if we could have that same kind of impact this year, in light of some of the economic circumstances in the state right now, that would be fabulous."

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