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BY ANDREW KULYK
& PETER FARRELL



Tickets! Tickets! Who's Got Tickets?

> Sabres basking in ticket demand not seen since the 70s

Wow! What a summer it has been for the Buffalo Sabres. Owner Tom Golisano has nearly breached the ceiling of the salary cap to sign the core of the team to long-term deals and committing to a legitimate run for the Stanley Cup; the team officially returned to the traditional blue and gold, but not without some bumps as controversy brewed and one guy with way too much time on his hands got some crazy online petition going to challenge the new team logo.

Then there are ticket sales. The Sabres have enjoyed a huge spike in orders for season tickets, and combined with mini pack equivalents have now sold more than 14,000 season tickets as of this past weekend. For comparison purposes, the team sold 7,516 in 2002-03, 6,939 in 2003-04, and 8,599 in 2005-06, the year after the lockout. Dare we say it, but the team is now approaching the point where they may need to cut off season ticket sales and establish a waiting list, something not done in decades.

According to Sabres spokesman and Public Relations Director Mike Gilbert, the team has not reached that point. Yet. "We're still selling season tickets, and it looks like we'll have enough inventory to accommodate everyone as we go into the season," said Gilbert.

Gilbert admitted that the team has not projected that far ahead in terms of cutting off sales, establishing waiting lists, or revisiting the policy of allowing season ticket holders to purchase additional playoff tickets. "Obviously with 14,000 tickets we wouldn't have enough playoff seats for all our customers, so that is something we still have to consider," said Gilbert. "I do want to stress that season ticket holders still have absolute rights to purchase their seats for any and all playoff games."

Sabres single game tickets went on sale this past Saturday, and buyers were invited to a special "presale" the day before, in exchange for signing up online at the Sabres Web site to become a "Sabres Insider." "Being part of this club gives the fan greater access to the team and all sorts of perks available on the Web site. We sold 11,000 single game tickets on Friday alone to our Insiders," reported Gilbert.

Managing General Partner Larry Quinn added that the Saturday single game sales also might have reached a record. Speaking to the media around mid-day, Quinn beamed: "Seventeen thousand single game tickets went through the window today as of 20 minutes ago."

While some fans might be "buddying up" to share season tickets, Gilbert states that most fans are taking the plunge because

season tickets are relatively cheap. "It actually makes more sense financially to buy the season ticket and sell some games off rather than buy, say, 20 games via mini pack."

Team officials feel very strongly that a portion of tickets should be held back for the single ticket buyer. Said Gilbert, "Within the hockey realm, there should always be a block of tickets available for the casual buyer. There are many fans who love and support the team, buy merchandise, but don't have the funds or the commitment to make such a large expenditure for tickets. We want to always make it so they are able to come to see a game in person."

This past Saturday the Sabres officially unveiled their new uniforms at an open scrimmage at HSBC Arena. Nearly 10,000 fans filled the lower bowl of the arena, and gave the players a loud and lengthy standing ovation as the team skated out onto the ice to the strains of "Hurricane 2000," the anthem of spring's playoff run. "I actually got chills as the event began," said Sabres goaltender Ryan Miller. "It was great to see so many fans come out to support the team."

Support the team? Not only were the fans supporting the team, they were in a spending mood as well, being the first day to buy tickets and the team store was doing a brisk business as well. "We had a limited supply of new logo merchandise available and we were pretty much picked clean," said Larry Quinn. "Quite a few fans were placing orders for their new team jersey as well."

Gilbert's advice to Sabres fans who want to attend games at HSBC Arena this season is to make their plans early and avoid getting shut out at the ticket window. "The two weekend Toronto games, November 4 and March 23 are sold out. At this point, we have limited or single tickets available for several other games. Our big sellers have been games during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, Opening Night against Montreal, the other Toronto games, of course."

And how about New Year's Day against the New York Islanders, when former Sabres coach Ted Nolan will make his first return to HSBC Arena, as Islander's head coach. "That game has sold well just being an afternoon game on a holiday, but yeah, that should stimulate some interest as well," Gilbert admitted.

Both Quinn and Gilbert went out of their way to salute local fans for their support of the Sabres. "The fans of Western New York and Southern Ontario have really shown what they're made of," said Gilbert. Quinn added, "We've come so very far in so short a time. We're really hoping we can build on last season's success."

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Q AND A WITH LARRY QUINN

This past weekend we caught up with Larry Quinn, Sabres Managing General Partner, who discussed a broad range of subjects about the team...

Did you approach this first weekend of training camp with any trepidation, not knowing what may happen in terms of fan reaction? I don't think the fans would ever be negative towards their team. There are a lot of kids down here, and that's the best thing about it. Last year I told people that I thought young kids really got into hockey in Buffalo, and for a long time I thought we were lacking that six-year-old and 12-year-old who becomes hooked for life. Corporate buyers tend to be more fickle and they come and go but it's the young ones who become the passionate fans. Many of our new season ticket customers report that their kids have a real interest in following the team and that was not the case a few years ago.

Do you feel vindicated the way the fans responded to the new uniforms? Not even near that! I never felt bad about the whole process so there is no reason to feel vindicated. As to the hijacking of the team logo before the official announcement, looking back today, this is the best guerilla marketing campaign anywhere. People were talking about the team—there are discussions and passions. Boy! How do you manufacture that? It's the best marketing campaign you could ever do.

Compare this experience to 1996 when new jerseys were last unveiled. Well there was a lot of enthusiasm in '96 when the jerseys changed. Remember we were also going into a new building so there was a lot of energy about that. I just always felt that black was not our identity, and whether people like the logo or not, our identity is still blue and gold and that was something we needed to get back to.

Are you pleased with the demand for tickets? We've already sold over 600,000 tickets, and last year, which was a very successful year, we sold around 650,000 tickets, so we're just 50,000 short of reaching last year's record. And while a number of games are sold out or approaching that, we still have roughly 80,000 tickets left and hope the fans will buy them up. But so far, so good.

Why aren't the Sabres doing a game in Rochester this year? Yeah, keep in mind we're not flying solo anymore; the players are our partners. They get a percentage of the revenues, so it's our obligation to maximize those revenues. It was one thing for Tom (Golisano) to say 'I'll take the hit from my own wallet', but now that wallet is somebody else's. And to take part in revenue sharing we have to show revenue growth. I feel bad about that, but who knows? Maybe we can do an outdoor game there someday.

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