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Winning pays

Gateway businesses thrive on crowds, cash

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The crowds will come again -- and Cleveland businesses already smell the money.

The Cavaliers' win over the Detroit Pistons on Monday night in the second round of the NBA playoffs guaranteed another game at The Q arena and another fan frenzy in the Gateway District.

Game 6 in the best-of-seven series will draw more than 20,000 people to The Q on Friday, the same night thousands more will pour into Jacobs Field next door to watch the Indians play the Pittsburgh Pirates.

It's the first time in 14 years the teams' seasons are overlapping this late into May -- and downtown businesses are loving it.

Basketball fans have thrown down about \$17.5 million on tickets, food and lodging in the city during the Cavs' playoff run, the Convention & Visitors Bureau of Greater Cleveland estimates. That's an estimated \$3.5 million for each of the five home games so far. And it probably means another \$3.5 million payday on Friday.

That's on top of the estimated \$2 million to \$3 million that baseball fans spend for each game in Jacobs Field.

"This doesn't mean the quiet crisis' is over, but we're on the road toward re-establishing our downtown as a center for recreational tourism," said Mark Rosentraub, dean of Cleveland State University's Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs.

That's good enough for the city's restaurants, bars and hotels -- especially those close to the action.

Flannery's Pub, a block from The Q, rang up 70 percent more sales Saturday than it

usually does, general manager Christine Connell said.

The Cavaliers and Indians both played home games that night against Detroit teams, drawing about 45,000 fans combined.

Enough of them headed to Flannery's that the bar almost sold out of beer -- making a stressful night for Connell and her crew.

"It was tight, but we made it," said Connell, who had a hectic Monday restocking the bar in time for that night's tip-off at The Q.

But you won't hear her -- or other downtown business owners -- complaining.

"What a great problem to have," she said.

Sales at the Winking Lizard Tavern's downtown location, just blocks from The Q and Jacobs Field, have jumped 25 percent this month compared with last May, said tavern partner John Lane.

The playoffs have increased business "exponentially" at the Lizard's other sites, Lane said, especially those in Lakewood and Independence, where about 300 people packed in earlier in the playoffs to watch the Cavs' road games on giant plasma TVs.

"Any bar with a TV is benefiting from this, not just the ones downtown," Lane said.

Hotels are loving it, too. Visiting basketball and baseball fans both need rooms.

The Radisson Hotel Cleveland-Gateway has sold out for nearly all of the Cavs' home playoff games, boosting business 36 percent this month compared with last May, said Vern Fuller, president of Marathon Associates, which manages the hotel.

Merchants outside the city are also enjoying a little double-dipping. Adler Sporting Goods in Beachwood usually tucks away its Cavs merchandise by May, but manager Chris Gromek said the store is selling armloads of wine and gold.

"We're selling a lot of Indians stuff, too, but most of it's Cavs and LeBron," Gromek said. "Everybody wants LeBron, LeBron, LeBron."

And that's OK with the Indians, said Bob DiBiasio, the team's vice president of public relations. They'll share the spotlight.

"This spikes the excitement level for both clubs," he said.

It spikes attendance, too.

The Indians sold about 600 tickets at the gate Saturday night shortly after the Cavs' game next door ended. People leaving The Q saw the Indians were only in the third inning and decided to take in another ballgame, DiBiasio said.

"That's the whole idea behind Gateway, a sports neighborhood," he said.

And the Cavs make great neighbors. Attendance has soared nearly 70 percent since the 2002-03 season and corporate sales jumped 97 percent, the Cavs report. And that was before they made the playoffs. The team's following grows every second, says President Len Komoroski, and this year's success will bring fans in by the busload.

"We're at the front end of our golden era," Komoroski said. "It'll only get bigger and better from here."

At Flannery's Pub, Connell hopes so.

"Give us another series," she said. "We've got plenty of beer."

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