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Blues hit the bricks to win back their fans

By **Jeremy Rutherford**
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
08/22/2007



Blues owner Dave Checketts
(Chris Lee/P-D)

The black Town Car pulled up in a Ladue neighborhood last week and Blues owner Dave Checketts emerged, decked out in a dark suit.

With the temperature near 104 degrees, Checketts needed to give no explanation for shedding his jacket. But as he was ushered toward makeup and then onto the set of a new Blues commercial, he said his reason for eliminating the extra layer was specific.

"I like the (shirt) sleeves rolled up," said Checketts, seeking a hard-working appearance as the Blues begin marketing their slogan for the 2007-08 season, "Whatever it takes."

The TV spot mimics the balcony scene from "Romeo and Juliet," with Checketts and other members of the Blues staring into a balcony-level camera, imploring fans to return to the rink.

Advertisement

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"We're trying to persuade someone who we lost the romance with to come back," Checketts said.

The advertising onslaught

began in earnest this week, but fans already were responding to the summer buzz created, in large part, by the signing of free agent Paul Kariya.

Two seasons after Bill and Nancy Laurie cut costs to sell the team, a move met with sparse crowds and the first back-to-back years out of the playoffs since 1978 and '79, the Blues are boasting a season-ticket renewal rate of 90 percent and have sold 2,500 new season tickets for the coming year.

The Blues had a season-ticket base of 5,600 in 2006-07. The 8,100 tickets already sold for the coming season is more than double the number of tickets sold at this time last summer.

"We're starting to see the turn that I was expecting to see," Checketts said. "I said several months ago I thought we would have the biggest increase in attendance of anybody in the league. It's a high bar to reach, but we have a chance to do that."

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The Blues ranked 27th among 30 NHL teams last season with an average attendance of 12,521. According to the league, they are among the top-selling teams this summer of the 14 teams that didn't qualify for last year's playoffs.

If last season's trend of about 6,000 non-season-ticket holders attending home games holds true, the Blues could see crowds approaching 14,000 regularly next season.

SEVERAL FACTORS

Hockey in St. Louis is not back to the point it was in the mid-1990s, when the Blues boasted a season-ticket base near 12,500

and had crowds of 19,500. But the team appears to be finding new fans and reconnecting with

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some old ones.

Some reasons for the improved ticket sales:

- February's announcement of lower season-ticket prices.
- The Blues were 27-18-9 after Andy Murray took over as coach in mid-December, spurring optimism about him being at the helm a full season.
- The arrival of defenseman Erik Johnson, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2006 draft.
- The signing of Kariya to a three-year, \$18 million contract.

Checketts said he doesn't believe "just one thing" has sold Blues fans on the direction of the franchise. But he said the Kariya signing "woke some people up. The Kariya thing was like, 'Oh wow, they really are serious about this.'"

The Blues reported selling 450 new season tickets in the week after signing Kariya, and 1,600 of their 2,500 new tickets have been sold since he joined the team. Also since the signing, the team has sold an average of 40 new season tickets per weekday and 200 per week. On that pace, with seven weeks left before the home opener Oct. 10, the ticket base could grow by 1,400. That would more than eclipse the 9,100 season-ticket holders in 2003-04, when the Blues had a record of 39-30-11-2 for 91 points.

"We're only 1,000 behind a year when they had a spectacular season," Checketts said. "That would be some goal to beat."

CHANGING MINDS

The Blues say that the upper bowl at Scottrade Center should be close to full this season, including a sellout of the \$7 seats.

"Now our focus continues to be on the lower bowl and our club seats, getting the corporate community involved and getting the lower bowl filled," said Peter McLoughlin, CEO of Blues Enterprises.

This summer, the Blues have held what they call "influencer parties," where Checketts, McLoughlin, minority owner Tom Stillman, Blues President John Davidson and members of the team meet with area business leaders in an effort to drum up interest.

Checketts said the parties have been a success, though he says the club has only scratched the surface with the corporate community.

"We're spending a lot of time getting to know people," he said. "They haven't known our ownership. They don't know the new management. So, we're spending a lot of time in front of people asking for them to come back."

Checketts and those leaders often end up talking about why the tickets were canceled in the first place.

"All of them had different reasons, some of them really unique," Checketts said. "I had somebody mention to me, I guess it was (Keith) Tkachuk that showed up at a Cardinals game in a Red Sox hat. That just deeply, deeply offended him ... so much so, he gave up his season tickets."

Another factor was the trade that sent Chris Pronger to Edmonton, which was completed before Checketts took over. "A disregard for the fans or their feelings," Checketts said some fans told him.


But he feels the tide changing.

"It's almost like I've been having these discussions with people, and they're getting it all out and they're deciding it's time to go on," Checketts said. "That's what I sense from them."

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