

The Miami Herald

Posted on Sun, Sep. 20, 2009

Will the Miami Dolphins' celeb-heavy strategy bring back the fans?

BY DOUGLAS HANKS AND ADAM H. BEASLEY

dhanks@MiamiHerald.com



MARICE COHN BAND / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Jimmy Buffett poses with the Miami Dolphins cheerleaders after his mini-concert announcing the official changing of the name of Dolphin Stadium to Land Shark Stadium, Friday, May 8, 2009.

It's already crunch time for Jimmy Buffett, Gloria Estefan, Serena Williams and the other celebrities the Miami Dolphins have recruited to boost attendance.

Football fans across the country are bracing for what the NFL warns could be a season pocked by television blackouts as a grim economy cuts into ticket sales and sponsors' willingness to buy empty seats.

Though the Dolphins sold out Monday's home opener with about 24 hours to spare before the Friday night deadline to avoid a TV blackout, tickets remain plentiful for the remaining games at Land Shark Stadium.

Add to that a depressing debut in Atlanta, where it took Miami nearly 57 minutes to score, and the stakes are even higher for new majority owner Stephen Ross' novel plan to use celebrities to boost excitement at home games.

of sports management at New York University. "Nobody's tried this," said Lee Igel, an assistant professor. "All bets are off."

Ross hopes to remake his stadium into more of an entertainment venue, with pop stars performing to connect to younger fans and celebrity attendees adding cachet to the stands.

With a new "orange carpet" VIP entrance and an invitation-only club modeled after South Beach's party circuit, the stadium has been retooled as a "place to be seen," said Dolphins CEO Mike Dee.

Central to the effort: a roster of stars that Ross, a billionaire New York developer, signed this summer as promotional partners.

Ross renamed his stadium after Buffett's beer in exchange for some appearances by the iconic Florida singer and having Buffett rewrite the lyrics of his hit *Fins* to be a Dolphins song. Then Ross signed five celebrity owners with ties to South Florida: Estefan and her husband, Emilio; tennis champs Serena and Venus Williams; and Latin pop singer Marc Anthony.

Ross, a graduate of Miami Beach High, also sees the stars as a way to tie the Dolphins to an integral element of South Florida: its celebrity party scene.

"It's like the Lakers," Ross said of the Los Angeles basketball team that's famous for A-listers like Jack

Nicholson and Leonardo DiCaprio sitting courtside. ``This is what this community is about. It's not like it doesn't exist already. It's about taking it and creating a party atmosphere with something for everybody."

The strategy is set to debut in full force Monday before a prime-time television audience for Monday's 8 p.m. game.

A source familiar with the preparations gave a strong hint that Buffett would play during Monday's tailgate party. The source said the pregame performer ``is someone Parrotheads will definitely be interested in seeing."

And the team predicts all its celebrity owners will be there for the game, too -- along with singer Jennifer Lopez, Anthony's wife. They'll be joined by T-Pain, the hip-hop star who was commissioned to sing a reggae dance-hall version of the Dolphins 1973 fight song.

While the moves have some fans grumbling -- the Change the Dolphins Fight Song page on Facebook has 296 members -- they are getting attention in the NFL as the league struggles with the weakest demand for game tickets in a decade.

``I think a lot of the NFL teams will be watching them to see if this works out," said Patrick Walsh, a professor of sports management at the University of Miami. ``If it's successful, I think other teams will follow suit."

Walsh said he doubted the new marketing plan could counteract the recession, and Dee said he expected it would take about a year for the changes to affect attendance.

He points to beefed-up amenities inside the stadium: revamped concession stands with flat-screen TVs to watch while waiting for food; new booths by Boar's Head and Carnegie Deli; and miniature devices for premium-seat holders that will show game footage from angles not available on the stadium's jumbo screens.

The Dolphins also are working to bring in faraway fans with ticket packages that include tailgate parties and chartered buses leaving from Naples, Palm Beach and the Keys. (The Keys bus will be reserved for season-ticket holders Monday.)

And they're using the Land Shark connection to beef up the pregame parking lot scene with concerts, sand sculptures, games and other diversions. The activities will be within view of the orange carpet where celebrities will enter the Ocean Drive Club, named after the glossy magazine devoted to fashion and the local party circuit.

``For some reason, in Miami, there hasn't been that sizzle" attached to Dolphins home games, Dee said. ``You've got to make it the place to be -- the place to be seen."

The aim is to reverse an erosion of fan support after the Dolphins' disastrous one-win season of 2007, which sent season-ticket sales plummeting from the prior year's high of 61,000 to 46,000 in 2008.

Team executives acknowledge that victories would solve most of their attendance problems. But they want enough support to sustain a losing season, too -- the kind of loyalty players enjoy elsewhere even when they disappoint on the field.

Most blame South Florida's warm winter climate, which forces football to vie with golf, beaches and barbecues on weekends.

``In Pittsburgh," former Steeler Joey Porter said during a recent break from practice for the Dolphins, ``they

don't have anything else.

"The weather sucks," he continued. "It's always cold. But it doesn't matter on Sunday. They look forward to one thing, and that's Steeler football."

Dee, who left the Boston Red Sox in May, said he's surprised at how many die-hard fans stay home when the Dolphins play.

At last week's meeting of the Doral Business Council, only three people raised their hands when Dee asked who in the crowd of 200 had season tickets.

People will tell me, "God I love the Dolphins," Dee said. "Really? When's the last time you went to a game? Gee, when did Marino retire?"

Dee said ticket sales are "well ahead" of where they were last season, which had no blacked-out games.

A series of losses early on could reverse last year's progress and force the first blacked-out Dolphins game since the team's 2002 home loss to the Ravens in a wild-card game.

"We're not immune to what other teams are facing in the rest of the league," Dee said. To avoid blackouts, "we have some work left to do."

He takes comfort that season-ticket sales are up slightly this year, approaching 50,000.

But even the improved numbers show the kind of disadvantage the Dolphins face compared with smaller cities where football rules.

It took the Baltimore Ravens one day to sell out its season, even with the recession. The 2001 Super Bowl champs sold 65,500 season tickets this year, with a 3,000-person waiting list.

That despite Baltimore's rank as the country's 24th-largest television market; Miami-Fort Lauderdale is 16th.

The Ravens could have sold more season tickets but held back some seats for fans interested in attending just a game or two. Those tickets sold out within 24 hours.

As of last week, Dolphins fans could buy eight seats together for seven of the team's eight home games -- including on the 45-yard-line for the Oct. 12 matchup against the arch-rival New York Jets and in the corner of the end zone when the Dolphins face off against the New England Patriots.

League rules require all non-club or suite seats to be sold within 72 hours of kickoff in order to televise it locally. NFL officials predict as many as 50 games across the league will be blacked out this year -- meaning one in five games would be off-limits to local TV audiences.

While that would be the worst record since 1998, league officials note blackouts used to be a way of life for most football fans. In the 1990s, between 30 and 40 percent of the games were blacked-out each season.

A blackout would foil the plans for many fans who are big targets for the Dolphins: those like Brent Rogers who prefer watching their team from the comfort of a living room.

"I've got a 52-inch plasma," the 28-year-old said, "so it's just as nice."

© 2009 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>