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Metro

Businesses cheer news of NHL lockout's end

Bars and restaurants near Garden have felt the pinch

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 07, 2013

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MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Waitress Becky Southworth delivered an order at the Harp.

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Becky Southworth has a full-time job as a high school tutor. But the 37-year-old Malden resident said that her part-time job waiting tables at the Harp in the North End of Boston is the one that “pays the bills.”

“Or used to,” she added, referring to the crowds who normally flock to the pub before and after Boston Bruins hockey games held in the arena across Causeway Street. “Hopefully, it will again soon.”

Southworth should soon get her wish. The National Hockey League is expected to start its season later this month after a four-month lockout, which led to the cancellation of about half of the scheduled games, ended Sunday morning when owners and players reached an agreement.

That means businesses like the Harp that surround the TD Garden expect to see sales heat up once the team returns to the ice and their loyal fans return to a part of the city that is often quiet when the venue is empty.

“It’s been so boring around here without hockey,” said 26-year-old Joshua Sheppard, who wore a B’s T-shirt while manning the counter at North Station Liquors on Causeway Street. “The Bruins are a big draw to the neighborhood.”

Many retailers in the area described Bruins fans as being especially loyal, more so than those who visit the Garden to watch the Boston Celtics play basketball.

And, “hockey people spend a lot more money across the board,” Sheppard said.

Standing beside Sheppard and wearing a Bruins jacket, the store’s owner, Smitty Patel, 37, of South Boston, estimated that sales to those who come to the area for hockey account for 10 to 15 percent of business.

Inside the Garden’s shop that sells official Bruins and Celtics gear, one worker said that sales of Celtics items tend to “fluctuate based on whether they’re doing good or not.”

But “Bruins fans are pretty much loyal the whole way through,” said the worker, who declined to give his name because he is not authorized to speak to media. “It’s crazy how much money Bruins fans will spend on merchandise.”

Laurel Ryan and Jen Parisi said that they often do not hold back on spending to cheer on their beloved B’s.

The friends, each wearing a Bruins T-shirt, said they do not follow any other sports, rarely watch television unless they are watching hockey, and buy as many Bruins tickets as they can afford.

Ryan, 19, of Abington, showed pictures of her bedroom wall, which is plastered with Bruins memorabilia.

She held out her wrist to show off a bracelet charm of the team’s spoked-B logo.

Ryan pulled out a Bruins-themed Dunkin’ Donuts gift card that she said she was given during the team’s 2011 Stanley Cup victory parade. She has hung onto it since, reloading money on it instead of getting a new one.

She said she had a hard time sleeping Saturday night as reports swirled that the lockout could soon end. She woke up Sunday at 7 a.m., checked Twitter, and saw a tweet from ESPN hockey columnist Pierre

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LeBrun, who said a deal had been reached.

“It was better than Christmas morning,” said Ryan. “I started freaking out. I didn’t know what to do.”

She woke her family to tell them the news and sent a joyful mass text to every number saved in her phone.

“I’m wicked excited that hockey’s back,” she said.

Not so fast, said some fans, who are still angry about the lockout and plan to stay away from the Garden and boycott team merchandise.

“I’m not going to go over there and throw my hard-earned money at them,” said Sheppard. “They could have ended this a lot sooner. In the meantime, it hurts everyone else.”

Patel shared his employee’s frustration.

“The owners are greedy and the players are greedy,” he said.

Still, Patel expects that once the pucks begin to drop again, his anger will subside. He will not hesitate to pay to watch the team play.

The return of such fans is what businesses in the area have been waiting for.

“It’s a big relief to us,” said Hannah Kempinski, marketing manager for the Briar Group, which owns the Harp and several other Boston-area bars and restaurants.

Southworth said she picked up additional tutoring jobs to help pay for classes at UMass Boston, where she is pursuing a degree in education.

“It’s been a really stressful four months,” she said.

She said the crowds hockey draws to the bar make for a better-paying job, and one that is more enjoyable.

“It’s fun. I’m looking forward to having fun again,” she said.

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