

Dollar Wise: For sports teams and fans, bargains become name of game ?

03:54 PM CST on Sunday, February 15, 2009
By MICHAEL E. YOUNG / The Dallas Morning News

Even in hard times, sports fans need their fill of hoops and hockey, soccer and baseball.

Fortunately, Dallas offers plenty of choices, from high school and college to minor league baseball and hockey. And you can do it on a budget.

That's how the hockey-mad Branch family of Arlington can catch the Dallas Stars and Texas Brahmas a couple of times a month.

"This is pretty much our only entertainment," said mom Michelle Branch. "We don't do movies much. We don't eat out a lot - maybe once a week at lunch because it's cheaper.

"We've learned to cut corners and spend the money on the things we really enjoy."

And that's hockey.

"We don't pay any more than \$20, \$25 a ticket - we're always looking for specials," she said. "When we go see the Stars, we park far away, for \$5, and walk. We probably spend \$7 to \$10 per person at the concession stand. It's nachos and a drink, and that's about it."

In return, they get \$15 seats "in the nosebleed section," but they yell as if their noses were pressed against the glass.

"The kids get so excited," Branch said.

They're just as excited watching the Brahmas in North Richland Hills, where a short walk brings free parking and a \$12 ticket gets them close enough to hear the boards rattle.

Mike Barack, the Brahmas' general manager, said he's seen an uptick in business as the economy has worsened.

"We try to be fan-friendly," Barack said. "We have all kinds of promotions - promos for free cookies, free waffles, free haircuts. We allow a couple of kids to ride the Zamboni. And we have postgame skates that include free skate rental."



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The Stars have deals, too, including \$15 tickets in February and a \$99 weekend plan for two tickets to three games.

"In these economic times, you have to do it," said Rob Scichili, the Stars' vice president of communications. "And the response has been very good."

"Any time you have a deal that has good value added to it, it works," he said. "And our sport is so much more fun to watch in person than on TV that the value is high."

Basketball fans can grab similar seats at American Airlines Center through the Dr Pepper Family Nights plan, with four tickets and four McDonald's Extra Value Meal coupons – there's no McDonald's at AAC.

The Mavs also have a more upscale "Platinum Plan," with two lower-level seats, \$30 in "AAC Cash" to spend and parking for \$200.

"Normally, the seats alone would be more than that," said Eric Ferrell, the Mavs' director of ticket sales and services. "So this is a great deal."

If you're willing to forsake the pros, the family can see the SMU Mustangs play the University of Tulsa on Feb. 28 for as little as \$30, including hot dogs and soft drinks.

Then there's high school hoops. Tickets are just a few dollars, snacks are cheap and you can find a seat like Jack Nicholson's – close enough to savor the squeak of soft soles on the hardwood.

That gets us through the winter. Spring brings soccer and baseball.

FC Dallas kicks off its season March 21 with a family pack – four seats, pizza and drinks, starting at \$79.

And with the area's crowded baseball market, the bargains are boundless.

The Grand Prairie AirHogs return for their second season with general admission tickets at \$4, and the best seat in the house, behind home plate, going for \$13.

"I've been hearing a lot lately about home-cations – people skipping long vacations and staying home instead," said Brian Rose, vice president of sales and marketing. "So we expect and forecast growth in a sluggish economy."



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Add promotions such as Thirsty Thursday, with beers for a buck, a swimming pool, party decks and a sports bar and grill that opens onto the field and Rose figures that the AirHogs can please fans of any age.

To sweeten the deal, the AirHogs won't charge for parking this season.

"Some venues want \$20 for parking," Rose said. "Hey, you can bring a family of four to the ballpark for \$20, and that's by design."

The Frisco RoughRiders, the Texas Rangers' Double-A affiliate, have a variety of packages, including all-you-can-eat seats for \$18 a game, said Michael Burns, the team's senior vice president.

And then there's the Friends and Family Package - four tickets, four baseball caps and four McDonald's Extra Value Meal coupons for \$29.50, available at seven games this season.

"It's like a \$120 value, great for a family outing," Burns said.

The Rangers pitch an opening-weekend special against the Kansas City Royals on April 17-19 with tickets valued at up to \$33 selling for \$10.

The Total Family package will be available at almost all home games this season. The package includes four tickets, jumbo hot dogs, soft drinks, a parking pass and unlimited play in the Sports Park for kids 13 and younger. Prices start at \$60.

"We have seven different discount programs this year, including a combo ticket with Six Flags and more all-you-can-eat games," said John Blake, the Rangers' executive vice president for communications.

"Obviously the economy is a factor. So we spent a lot of time this winter trying to figure out how we can remain a great value for our fans."

