

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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You'd have thought, based on the reaction last week, that Tom Golisano had announced plans to build Paychex's next world headquarters near the Buffalo waterfront.

Such was the starry-eyed assessment of the news his Sabres are "lowering" ticket prices, if indeed there is hockey in the foreseeable future. Of course, the National Hockey League's chances of actually starting its regular season on time this fall is right about on par with the chances of the Adelpia Tower being built.

One such glowing assessment of the Golisano ticket plan – the four-tiered idea of charging different ticket prices for different games for the same seat -- describes it as a "gamble that he can increase team revenues by filling HSBC Arena."

Really? It's true, a number of ticket prices will go down, but the newly created "gold" level games are aptly named. A visit to Fort Knox might be in order before visiting the ticket window, no matter where you want to sit.

On top of that, the new "silver" level games are also more expensive at the box office on the vast majority of the 300 level tickets than they were a year ago. In other words, upon closer scrutiny, almost half of the games will charge more for individual 300 level tickets than last year, reaching into the bank accounts of the fans who the team most purportedly wants to help.

In fact, the new plan almost guarantees a rise in ticket revenue for the team without lifting a marketing finger. Although not a lot of people were actually paying attention, no less than Larry Quinn himself, the Sabres' point man on a media barnstorming tour, offered an interesting math lesson.

Let's assume the NHL does play a full season starting this fall. If the Sabres "only" were to sell exactly the same number of tickets for the 2004-05 season as they did last year – and played the exact same schedule, same teams, same nights of the week, -- the franchise would actually generate \$1.2 million in additional ticket revenue under the new plan. Some gamble.

All of this is certainly not to bash the team's efforts – the plan amply rewards those willing to make long-term investment in the team with its season ticket price reduction – but rather to at least point out that it isn't quite the magnanimous and altruistic venture of an empathetic billionaire trying to pull a bloodied and bowed region from the doldrums.

In fact, the real story here – again confirmed by Quinn the day after the Sabres' glitzy press conference – is all about whether or not Buffalo can and will even support professional hockey on a long-term basis. That's what this ticket plan is all about.

Said Quinn simply, "It can't fail". He didn't mean it is such a sure-fire money maker that all they would have to do is open the arena doors 40 times a year and be skate deep in twenties. What he meant is: this is Golisano and the franchise going "all in" in the NHL's version of no limit poker. There's nothing left to fall back on, no additional money tucked away in a secret Golisano bank account that will once again keep the Sabres afloat.

While no doubt Toronto fans will fill the Buffalo building at virtually whatever price the Sabres ask – tickets at the Air Canada Center for Maple Leaf games are as priceless as a hockey player's original front teeth - there are at least four more "gold" level games that will peak lower bowl box office ticket prices by more than 50 percent on those given nights.

Friday nights are popular, to be sure. In fact, one February stretch of Friday night games last year all drew crowds of over 18,000. But, will fans fork over \$120 bucks a ticket to see Tampa Bay, the New York Islanders or the Los Angeles Kings, the same teams that drew those crowds a few months back, even if it is a Friday night? And will cheaper visits from Anaheim really boost a Tuesday night gate by five or six thousand people? Those are the real gambles.

On the same week when the former team owner – he of great promises and no delivery of tools or anything else for that matter – was found guilty of spending money on everything BUT his hockey team, Golisano is refreshing. Nothing wrong with being for the fans, even if it's more about yourself, whether we realize it or not.

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)