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'It's an excellent time to be a Steelers fan'

Tickets to the game cheapest in years

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By Dan Majors, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Going ... going ... wait a minute. They're still there.

Steelers fans interested in going to Super Bowl XLIII Feb. 1 in Tampa, Fla., cannot only find an abundance of tickets available through online brokers, but the prices are lower than they've been in years.

"It's an excellent time to be a Steelers fan. It's going to cost you a heck of a lot less to get better seats," said Cliff Mark, co-founder of ninjatickets.com, a company that is a search engine for most of the top online ticket agencies out there. Think of it as the Expedia of ticket brokers.

Two weeks ago, Mr. Mark said, Super Bowl tickets were listing at an average of \$5,000 apiece. Many of those tickets were being sought by overly optimistic fans of the Philadelphia Eagles, who were eliminated Sunday.

"But when Arizona got in, the costs dropped," he said. "Now we're seeing \$1,640, \$1,600 and \$1,540. It might be worthwhile to wait until early next week, where it might bottom out at \$1,400. But I wouldn't wait much longer, because the best seats start to go."

Similar low prices could be found at Internet auction sites such as eBay and Craigslist.

"The magic number is \$1,300," said Don Vaccaro, CEO of ticketnetwork.com. "We don't expect the tickets to go below that."

The National Football League distributes Super Bowl tickets according to a formula. It gives 17.5 percent to each of the participating teams, 5 percent to the host city's team, and 34.8 percent to the other 29 teams (1.2 percent each). The remaining 25.2 percent goes to a fan lottery, the players' union, the media and other NFL associates.

The average price of a Super Bowl ticket yesterday was around \$2,600.

Compare that price to average ticket prices from the past six Super Bowls: 2008 (Giants-Patriots) - \$3,536; 2007 (Colts-Bears) - \$4,004; 2006 (Seahawks-Steelers) - \$3,009; 2005 (Eagles-Patriots) - \$2,659; 2004 (Patriots-Panthers) - \$2,290; and 2003 (Raiders-Buccaneers) - \$2,767.

Of course, \$1,500 would get you the cheapest seat in the upper level of Raymond James Stadium. Fans can pay more for better seats -- stubhub.com lists a private luxury suite at \$125,004.

Spokesmen for various ticket brokers attribute the lower prices and greater availability to the economy and the less-than-glamorous match-up of the Steelers and the Arizona Cardinals.

"Corporate spending slashed this year, big time," Mr. Vaccaro said. "We haven't seen it like this since the Super Bowl after the Sept. 11 attacks."

"The current economic climate is having a depressing effect on discretionary events, such as sporting events," said Scott Roback, a vice president with razorgator.com, an online ticket agency. "Some of the corporate sponsorships and travel have seen cutbacks. And that makes more tickets available to the consumer."

"Sure, the price is affected by the economy, but more importantly the match-up," said Sean Pate, spokesman for stubhub.com, which had 3,600 tickets available Wednesday night.

"A team like the Cardinals, which does not have the national fan base, doesn't have the type of appeal that the Eagles might have had," he said. "And had it been the Ravens and the Cardinals, I think the prices would have been extraordinarily low."

The problem isn't the Steelers, said Russell Lindmark, owner of ticketsolutions.com. It's the Cardinals.

"The preponderance of demand is coming from Steelers fans," Mr. Lindmark said. "Because of the Steelers' history, their fans are spread all over the country, and we're getting a lot of people asking for tickets on the Steelers' side of the field. The Cardinals don't have that history or passion that the Steelers

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of the field. The Cardinals don't have that history or passion that the Steelers fans do."

"Once the Eagles were eliminated, the price went straight down," said Mr. Vaccaro. "And it's still continuing down."

"This is going to be the most affordable Super Bowl in years," said Mr. Pate. "So far, we've had buyers from 42 states, and that's typical with the Super Bowl because it's a national event. But 21 percent of the tickets we've sold have been to Pennsylvania. The next most is Florida at 18 percent and then Arizona at 8 percent."

Among the factors that play into why Arizona fans aren't buying as many tickets is the distance to Tampa and the fact that this whole Super Bowl thing is new to them. To Steelers fans, it's old hat.

"Cardinals fans may be seeing a little bit of a sticker shock, having never tried to buy Super Bowl tickets before," Mr. Pate said. "Steelers fans are more used to this."

"But volume actually is up. In fact, this Super Bowl has sold more tickets than any one on StubHub before. That, of course, is being driven by the lower prices."

But the lower prices aren't hurting the online brokers, even though their fees are based on a percentage of each sale.

"We're making less on each sale, but we're selling more," Mr. Vaccaro said.

And most of those tickets are ending up in the hands of Steelers fans.

"Just from eyeballing our sales orders, I can tell you there are more sales coming from Pennsylvania," said Mr. Roback of RazorGator. "Certainly more than from Arizona."

"I think it's going to be two-thirds Steelers fans," predicted Mr. Vaccaro. "The other third will be Arizona or just football fans."

Mr. Lindmark believes it will be even more lopsided than that.

"Ten-to-1, Steelers to Cardinals," was his fan projection. "It's going to be a Steelers home game. If there's less than 75 percent of the fans standing there waving their Terrible Towels, I'll be very surprised."

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