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Super Bowl: Scalping tickets ain't what it used to be

By Justin Vellucci
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Monday, January 26, 2009



Even the Super Bowl isn't invincible against a slumping economy.

Tickets to the big game, matching the Steelers against the Arizona Cardinals on Feb. 1 in Tampa, Fla., are fetching less money than last year's contest on the secondary market -- the network of brokers and ticket resellers whose prices can be several times a ticket's face value.

"There's a supply and demand for everything," said Bob Strauss, a professor of economics and public policy at Carnegie Mellon University. "I would guess, all things held equal, that prices would be lower than last year."

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Ticket prices at viagogo, a London-based secondary ticket exchange, are down about 40 percent to \$2,900, according to Reuters. Ticket prices at TicketNetwork.com, based outside Hartford, Conn., are down about 26 percent to an average of \$2,200. Even last week, prices dropped on TicketNetwork.com.

"I think people are just less likely to make those large purchases this year," said Mike Garvie, who's in charge of purchasing and evaluations for TicketNetwork.com. "People are keeping things a little closer to the belt."

Kathy Cauley, an Edgewood business owner and Steelers fan for years, might be one of those people. Cauley booked two hotel rooms in Florida and will be traveling in the South anyway, but the cost of Super Bowl tickets might keep her from making the pilgrimage.

"I'm not paying a fortune for a ticket," said Cauley, 55.

"I really want to go," said Jason Whitehair, 48, a Steelers fan and Ambridge native living in Plano, Texas. "But I'm not going to mortgage my house to go."

The market for Super Bowl tickets was stronger last year. Tickets on the secondary market to the 2008 Super Bowl started around \$2,200 a ticket, said M.J. DiBerardino, co-founder of FTE Inc., a Connecticut-based software company that runs FreeTicketExchange.com. This year, that low is about \$1,600.

DiBerardino blamed corporations, which are cutting

Super Bowl XLIII



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Allegheny County libraries, which are cutting back on Super Bowl spending in light of slipping stocks and a shaky economy.

"They've cut costs and budgets big time this year," DiBerardino said. "It's played a big factor on the ticket market as a whole. ... Inherently, the prices are dropping."

Freelance ticket seller Kevin Minto said he has watched the company for which he works drop the price of upper-level tickets from \$2,000 to \$1,700 and lower-level tickets from \$2,500 to \$2,100.

"I think it's the economy," said Minto, 53, of St. Petersburg, Fla. "And if it was the Steelers and another team, maybe it would be stronger. Arizona Cardinals? That's a long trek."

The imprint of the economy can be seen in the face value of some Super Bowl tickets.

National Football League spokesman Brian McCarthy said 53,000 Super Bowl tickets were priced at \$800 and 17,000 tickets were priced at \$1,000. But, the league set aside a small number -- 500 each for the Steelers and Cardinals -- at \$500 apiece, a reflection of tough economic times.

"This is a first for the NFL," McCarthy said. "It's a direct response to what our fans are facing."

Keith Nowalk, a Steelers season-ticket holder since 1992, said he won't bother with the secondary market.

Though Nowalk failed to win Super Bowl tickets this year through a lottery for season-ticket holders, he plans to go to Tampa. He watched the Steelers play in Super Bowls in 1996 and 2006 and doesn't want to miss this one.

"I'm going to do the same thing I did (in '96) -- I'm going to fly down there and buy a ticket off someone at the game looking to get rid of them," said Nowalk, 45, of Plum, a builder and developer. "I think there will be a lot of tickets. ... I don't think Arizona's as die-hard as the Steelers' fans are."

It's just a six-hour drive from Chris McKown's home in Smyrna, Ga., to Tampa, but when he talks about the Super Bowl, it sounds light years away.

The youth pastor, who grew up a Steelers fan in Virginia, looked at tickets on Web sites such as StubHub but he's more worried about guarding against foreclosure on his condo than shelling out \$1,000 for a ticket.

"There's no way I could afford the price of a ticket," said McKown, 29. "I'd have to really be blessed in order to go."

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