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FINAL FOUR AT FORD FIELD

Family fun on tap

Game sold-out but room at the party

BY BEN SCHMITT • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • FEBRUARY 9, 2009

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Still hoping for a ticket to the Final Four?

Sorry, all 72,000 tickets are sold-out. But there will be plenty of events downtown -- many of them free -- that will allow folks to get in on the excitement when Detroit hosts the men's collegiate basketball championships at Ford Field during the first weekend of April.

A full slate of activities is expected to be announced at a news conference scheduled for this morning at Ford Field. But the Free Press has an early look at the action that's being planned.

The NCAA, the Detroit Local Organizing Committee and host institution the University of Detroit Mercy are offering three days of entertainment and fun, including concerts along the Detroit riverfront, indoor basketball-themed family activities at Cobo Center and an attempt to set a Guinness world record for the number of people dribbling a basketball.

And long after the tournament is done, the NCAA hopes that its presence here will be remembered with the four early-childhood learning centers it plans to establish in Detroit through the NCAA Final Four Legacy program

"Obviously, Detroit has had some recent problems and we're just delighted to be able to make a contribution to the city," said Mike Slive, commissioner of the NCAA's Southeastern Conference and chair of the Division I Men's Basketball Committee. "We're going to create a celebration that's going to be very meaningful for everybody."

The Final Four is expected to draw a minimum of 30,000 out-of-town visitors and generate \$30 million to \$50 million in economic impact, based on studies of past Final Fours.

Here are some of the highlights:

- **The Big Dance:** This outdoor festival begins April 3 along the riverfront and runs through April 5. It will include live music all three days, food, a military flyover, pep bands, mascots and special guests. Both semifinal basketball games on Saturday will be broadcast on a giant video screen. Admission is free.



March 2008 photo by DIANE WEISS/Detroit Free Press

Ford Field, which hosted the Midwest Regional last year, will be the site of the NCAA men's Final Four during the first weekend of April.

READING PROGRAMS ARE PART OF NCAA TOURNAMENT'S LEGACY

Besides all the fun activities associated with the Final Four, the NCAA is partnering with the United Way for Southeastern Michigan and the Detroit Local Organizing Committee to create the Final Four Legacy Program. The program is to provide funding and support for literacy centers in Detroit neighborhoods.

The centers will promote early childhood reading and are expected to be located in southwest Detroit and the Brightmoor, Osborn and North End neighborhoods.

The Detroit Local Organizing Committee also plans to conduct a food recovery program that will allow the NCAA and other constituents the chance to donate leftover food from various events to local charities and homeless shelters.

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The entertainment lineup has not yet been announced, but likely will include local bands mixed with big-name national headliners.

• **NCAA Hoop City:** The family-oriented event will transform Cobo Center into a four-day hub of interactive activities related to basketball and other NCAA sports. There will be autograph sessions, family entertainment, a battle of the bands, cheerleaders and trivia contests. Tickets are \$8 for anyone 12 and older and \$6 for ages 3 to 11.

• **Open practice:** Fans can watch all four participating teams practice at Ford Field on April 3. Practices begin at noon. Admission is free.

• **Road to the Final Four 5K run/walk:** On April 4, runners can take a jog or walk through downtown Detroit. The race begins at 8:30 a.m. and costs \$25. The entry fee includes a long-sleeved Nike T-shirt for the first 1,000 runners, free admission to Hoop City, and a chance to win tickets to the games.

• **NCAA Final Four Dribble:** In an attempt to enter the Guinness Book of Records, about 4,000 youths ages 18 and younger are being sought to dribble through the streets from Ford Field to Cobo Center on April 5. The first 4,000 youths to register online or on-site are to receive a free basketball, T-shirt and admission to Hoop City. On-site registration begins at 11:30 April 5 at Ford Field. Register online at www.ncaa.com/finalfour.

• **National Championship Game:** Tip-off is at 9:21 p.m. April 6.

"Over the years, the weekend has evolved from three basketball games into a celebration of college basketball and a celebration of the community," Slive said. "We want people to be able to come down, whether they go to the games or take part in the weekend of festivities."

Last year, the Big Dance event attracted 167,000 people to the streets of San Antonio, according to the NCAA.

More than 1,500 news media representatives are credentialed for the events.

"We're very enthused about the upcoming Final Four and the opportunity that our 800-plus hospitality members now have to demonstrate metro Detroit's capability to host marquee events," said Larry Alexander, president and chief executive officer of the Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau.

For more information go to :www.ncaa.com/finalfour

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