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Big crowds at Legends Classic bode well for return of tournament

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By SUSAN LULGJURAJ, Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, November 28, 2010

ATLANTIC CITY - The Legends Classic men's college basketball tournament lived up to its name this weekend.

Former NBA stars Tim Hardaway and Glen Rice sat in the stands as they cheered on their sons. Jim Beoheim, one of the most successful coaches of all time, directed his Syracuse team. Former NBA players Pervis Ellison and Allan Houston hung out in Boardwalk Hall for the thrill of the games.

The stars came out for the Legends Classic, and so did the crowds.

The tournament averaged 5,876 over two days, an increase from last year's event. That makes The Gazelle Group, which runs the Classic, very happy.

The semifinal round drew 6,273 on Friday, with 5,478 attending championship Saturday.

"It drew well. When all is said and done, we'll probably be in the top five of the early-season tournaments," Gazelle Group president Rick Giles said.

That doesn't guarantee a third year in Atlantic City for the Legends Classic.

The tournament is evaluated on a year-to-year basis, but if attendance figures are an indicator, the tournament could return next year. One reason is the passion of the fans.

Syracuse, which won the tournament final 80-76 over Georgia Tech on Saturday, had one of the largest groups of fans at the Legends Classic.

Michigan coach John Beilein even commented on the amount of Syracuse fans.

"There was too much orange in the building," he said after the Wolverines' loss to Syracuse 53-50 on Friday night.

The Orange's home state, New York, is within driving distance, so plenty of fans made the trip.

"We try to go to at least one game a year," Mary Perry, a 2001 Syracuse graduate who lives in New York City, said Saturday. "This trip made so much sense. I get to watch my team play and play some blackjack at the Borgata. Why wouldn't we come?"

Before coming to Atlantic City last year, the Legends Classic spent the previous two years at the Prudential Center in Newark, where the two-day tournament averaged 3,521 in 2008.

The Gazelle Group looked for a venue change when there was a date conflict.

Atlantic City was looking to add more sports to its calendar to go along with boxing, the Atlantic 10 Conference men's basketball tournament and the state high school individual wrestling championships. So officials from the Atlantic City Convention & Visitors Authority made it known they wanted to add more college sports.

Giles called ACCVA executive director Jeffrey Vasser first since they had discussed opportunities over the years.

Atlantic City residents are happy the deal worked out to bring elite college basketball into their backyard.

"I love watching these games," said Eugenio Ramirez, 16, of Atlantic City. "I was here last year, too. I don't get to go to many games. I have to watch everything on TV."

While fans from Atlantic County didn't make up the bulk of the crowd, they certainly have been a help in the success of the Legends Classic. Last year's first night saw a walk-up crowd of 1,000 fans.

Local groups have benefited from the tournament, as well. The Atlantic City High School band played at The Legends Classic both years, and the Boys and Girls Club of America from Vineland did a dance routine for the halftime show of the championship game this year.

"This is my first year in the band, and I didn't think I'd ever come to play at something like this," said Atlantic City senior Emmanuel Acosta, 17, who plays the tenor saxophone.

This tournament gives hope not only to future basketball players, but even those cheering them on.

"The fans, the energy and everything here is great," said An Le, 16, who plays trombone in the Atlantic City High School band. "I'd love to do this in college."

The first year of the tournament in the resort averaged 4,390 fans, with 5,145 on the first night to see Michigan State, Florida, Rutgers and Massachusetts.

"We want to be able to do better than what we did last year," Giles said. "We want to see an increase. In any event, you want to see growth."

He got that with the number of fans who made it out for four college basketball games on Thanksgiving weekend.

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