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Teams hustle to fill seats in recession

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As another summer blows by, the boys of fall and winter approach once more the sports fan's horizon.

But it's an ominous sky for the owners of the Detroit Pistons, Lions and Red Wings, as they try to peddle tickets and fill stadium seats during the worst economic slump in 70 years.

Even the dynastic Wings, coming off back-to-back trips to the Stanley Cup Finals, see choppy ice ahead. "Tickets as low as \$9 for select games," blared recent headlines in Red Wings newspaper ads and the team's Web page.

The lowly Lions, coming off a winless football season, have been pitching a "Super 3-Game Pack" savings of \$18, along with single-game tickets of \$30 and full-season-ticket offer of \$230.

A tall order to fill

Up at the Palace of Auburn Hills, the Pistons face the region's most daunting sports marketing task.

Yes, the same Pistons often praised as a model pro basketball franchise, a team that advanced deep into the playoffs every year from 2003 to 2008, posting a five-year streak of 259 home game sellouts that ended in February.

In a horribly timed collapse, the Pistons skidded to a losing record last year, following a disastrous trade of Chauncey Billups for Allen Iverson. Iverson, along with big men Rasheed Wallace and Antonio McDyess, are now gone and rookie coach Michael Curry was fired.

"We were really worried back in May and June," said Tom Wilson, president of Palace Sports & Entertainment, the umbrella group that includes the Pistons and Palace.

Empty seats hurt credibility

"Things were really bleak," Wilson added, with the Pistons in flux just as Chrysler and General Motors were declaring bankruptcy. "We even discussed internally making a money-back offer, giving people until September to return tickets for a refund, but we got talked out of that one."

Instead, the Pistons rolled back ticket prices 5% and offered a further 10% discount to early birds who pay in advance for season tickets.

"Some of the fear is going away," Wilson said, with the addition of a new coach and some promising young players, "but it was palpable."

Still, to sell corporate luxury suites, "we have to be yentas, matchmakers," Wilson said, arranging

partnerships among companies to share many of the Palace's 180 suites, with each partner entitled to so many Pistons games or concerts.

"We've had matchmaking functions with 40 different companies," he added. Most of the 100 lower-level suites are leased, but there are a few vacancies for the first time in seven years.

Are all the discounts harming the integrity of the entertainment product at the Palace? Wilson replies, "Nothing harms your integrity more than playing to thousands of empty seats."
