

The Miami Herald

July 10, 2010

Circulation: 222,742

LeBron means big bucks flow to Miami

■ A day after his big announcement, the 'LeBron Effect' was already being felt in South Florida hotels and restaurants.

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Like a shot of espresso to a recessionary hangover, news that the NBA's most sought-after free agent is "bringing my talents to South Beach" created instant excitement Friday for tourism promoters, hotels and others who stand to win when stars swarm into Miami.

Call it the aura of LeBron James, one that brings with it the cachet of celebrities in and out of the game, and the prospect of fresh dollars flowing in. "LeBron isn't just a basketball player, he's a brand, and that brand is sold worldwide," said accountant Tony Argiz, a partner with Morrison, Brown, Argiz and Farra.

MULTIMILLION IMPACT

Argiz threw out an economic impact estimate of \$500 to \$600 million, factoring in the increased value of the Miami Heat franchise, the multimillion-dollar homes Bosh and James are expected to buy, and the potential bonus of multiple Miami playoff series over the next five years.

Neisen Kasdin, lawyer and former Miami Beach mayor, said he thinks the Heat triple play could be more significant to the city than the Marlins stadium now being built in Little Havana.

"This will have some of the Art Basel effect on Miami," said Kasdin, referring to the cultural and business development spurred by the highly successful fair. "You have a happening event that draws the world's attention to the community in a way that makes people want to

invest."

That kind of real economic impact takes years. But already Friday, the LeBron Effect was showing up downtown as well as in Miami Beach, where ailing boutique hotels like the Gansevoort South, Shore Club and Sagamore could use a boost.

James was ensconced overnight in one of the 25 rooms he'd rented at the W Hotel in South Beach. The reservations team at the Fontainebleau Resort was busily fielding inquiries for package prices with Heat tickets and had received "numerous requests" from sports agents about throwing events at the resort's cabanas and restaurants and nightclubs, said president and general manager John Rolfs.

"You couldn't have scripted it better," said William Talbert III, CEO of the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau.

The signings brought an immediate shift in press coverage. "Look at what has happened in the last 24 hours," PR specialist Tadd Schwartz, who promotes downtown, said. "We've spent the last year talking about the condo crash, foreclosures and the oil spill. For the past 48 hours, all of that has changed. Now we're talking about LeBron and what that brings."

South Beach restaurant magnate Myles Chefetz of China Grill Management reported a jam-up of text messages from pro athletes, sportscasters and regular diners wanting to make sure they'll still be able to get a table at Prime 112, the sports celebrity haunt where D-Wade watched James' nationally televised lovefest on ESPN Thursday night.

It's at places like Prime 112 where the NBA-celebrity connection thrives, and hospitality types are salivating that heat over the Heat could help pull the Beach and a developing down-

town scene out of the stubborn economic slowdown.

Former Miami Dolphins safety Louis Oliver, who now promotes social events that attract professional athletes, likened the buzz to the Beach of the 1990s, when it shot into the stratosphere as an international party center.

"You may have to make reservations months in advance to go to . . . top places," Oliver said. "It'll pick up everything from hotels to taxis."

"It will be the same thing that happened in the Madonna days," predicted Terry Zarikian, director of product development for China Grill Management.

"Players are attracted to things attached to Miami Beach, South Beach," said Miami Beach-based Drew Rosenhaus, the No. 1 National Football League player agent. "I've been inundated with phone calls from clients. They want to not only go to the games, but the hangouts, shopping and the restaurants."

EATING OUT

The benefits may be significant for the burgeoning restaurant scenes in Midtown Miami and the Design District. Heat fans already flock to Sra Martinez, the casual-hip Design District space owned by super-chef Michelle Bernstein.

"We've got people who come before and after the Heat games, and we know for sure that's going to add more people," said manager Jorge Anaya-Lopez. "If they really start to win a lot, we'll see more T-shirts and jerseys in here on game night."

The LeBron Effect showed up Friday in ways big and small — even pumping a little energy into the real-estate market. Edgardo Defortuna of Fortune International Realty said he had phone calls from fans in Brazil, Venezu-

ela and Argentina — including one Argentinian who told him he'd buy an apartment at the Icon in downtown Miami if de Fortuna could score him Heat tickets.

Agent Penni Chasens of Cervera Realty said LeBron's move convinced a buyer to cough up an extra \$100,000 to sign a near-\$1 million deal at a condo at the Marquis near the American Airlines Arena.

South Florida Wal-Mart stores announced they would stock LeBron James Heat jerseys beginning Saturday at select stores, starting at \$14.

At the Shake Shack in Miami Beach, the "Le-Brat James" — a griddle bratwurst with "Heat" from Tabasco-simmer onions — was already on the menu. At \$5.75, its price was far more affordable to regular tourists than those at Prime 112, where Garrettsville, Ohio, car salesman John Grondin and his teacher wife Tina were chuckling in disbelief over the \$30 Kobe hamburger and \$88 Porterhouse for two.

The couple enjoyed a swim Friday in South Beach, and its "clean, smooth, crystal-clear" beaches had left the Grondins impressed.

Even if they would have preferred that LeBron stick to being a tourist himself.

Miami Herald staff writers David J. Neal, Michael Vasquez, Stephanie Genardi, Laura Stampler and Sara Frederick contributed to this report.