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Syracuse-Penn State game is drawing mostly shrugs

By ZACH SCHONBRUN

When the first full day of the college football season kicks off Saturday afternoon, the Ainsworth bar in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood will undoubtedly be ready. Reservations for more than 250 seats started being taken two weeks ago and were sold out by Thursday. Forty flat-screen televisions will be tuned to football.

Alabama football, that is.

"We play 'Sweet Home Alabama' and all Alabama fight songs throughout the course of the game," said Dennis Bogart, the bar's chief marketing officer.

Across the Hudson River, the College Classic at MetLife Stadium will feature Syracuse and Penn State, two programs with rich histories, yet New Yorkers have greeted their arrival with something like a collective yawn.

Selling tickets for even half of the 82,000-seat stadium — as MetLife organizers did for a game between Syracuse and Southern California last year — has been a struggle. Tickets went on sale in April, but were still being advertised this week on the daily deals Web site LivingSocial. Seats could be found on StubHub for as low as \$31 on Friday afternoon — cheaper than a parking pass for the Giants' home opener against the Denver Broncos on Sept. 15.

As more universities like Syracuse, Army, Notre Dame and Penn State jockey to play at MetLife and Yankee Stadium, fans in the metropolitan area do not appear to be clamoring to greet them.

And while Rutgers' move to the Big Ten was trumpeted as a breakthrough for the conference into the New York market, the question of how many people actually paid it any notice remains.

"When you ask people what's your favorite football team, they'll still say the Jets or the Giants," said **Walt Hameline**, the athletic director and football coach at Wagner College on Staten Island. "If you ask a lot of New Yorkers, they wouldn't even know that Penn State and Syracuse are playing this week."

A study by Scarborough Sports Marketing from February 2012 through March 2013 ranked the top 77 markets in affinity for college football and found that only 7.6 percent New York area residents considered themselves to be "very interested" in the sport. That ranked 76th, slightly ahead of Providence, R.I.

That was paltry compared with Birmingham, Ala., (52 percent) or Columbus, Ohio, (44.1 percent), and it trailed Buffalo (10 percent) in terms of statewide interest. It was in the same ballpark with Philadelphia (12.4 percent) and Boston (8.7 percent), where Saturdays in autumn are sometimes regarded as "the day before the Patriots play."

"It's just such a huge market, such an expensive market," Bill Nielsen, vice president for sales at Scarborough, said of the New York area. "It's not anywhere near as easy to reach as it would be in Birmingham or Columbus, where you could shotgun approach it."

To Nielsen, the more indicative figure in the rankings is the total number of fans who made up that percentage: more than 1.2 million, the third most behind Los Angeles and Atlanta. That is what conference officials and athletic directors want to capitalize on.

“Just because of the numbers, it can’t be dismissed,” Nielsen said. “You’re not telling the full story if you say New York is the lowest-ranking market. There’s over 1 million people very interested.”

Boo Corrigan, the athletic director at Army, said the market’s numerous pro sports franchises made it difficult to get media attention. But the possibility of such a large population within 60 miles of West Point is too great to ignore.

“It’s a challenge, but I think it’s a great opportunity,” Corrigan said, adding: “That’s 16 million opportunities, not 16 million challenges. That’s our approach.”

Getting fans to games is another matter. In addition to Saturday’s game, MetLife will host Syracuse-Notre Dame in 2014. “MetLife Stadium is committed to continuing our rich history of bringing big-time college football to the region,” Brad Mayne, the stadium’s chief executive, said in a statement.

Part of the struggle to sell tickets to Saturday’s game could be related to Penn State’s declining attendance, which fell for a fifth straight year in 2012, down to 96,730 on average from 101,427 the year before. The program has been shaken by a sexual abuse scandal and its aftermath. On the secondary market, Penn State average ticket prices have dropped 34 percent since 2011, according to a spokesman from TqiIQ, a ticket information Web site.

Hameline recalled the popularity of the locally flavored Liberty Conference in the 1980s, when Wagner annually faced Fordham, Iona, Hofstra, St. John’s, Pace and the Merchant Marine Academy. Rivalries were formed, and the news media and fans paid attention to the story lines, he said. “It was a smaller level, but it was very competitive and it was a healthy thing,”

Hameline said.

Today, with shrinking athletic budgets for lower-level programs, college football’s presence in New York City has been drastically reduced. Rutgers and Syracuse have tried to fill the void, but for some it has not stirred much other than the typical reaction: that’s nice, but what time are the Giants playing?

“Syracuse is Syracuse,” **Hameline** said. “But if you’re a New Yorker, you think upstate is Westchester.”