

At play

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The view from the Diamond Club seats at Citizens Bank Park inspired even Phillies fans to hope for a World Series victory as the Phils faced off against the Braves in late September.

At Wachovia Center (facing page), club box and luxury suites are the way to go.



In the Hot Seat

Getting the best seats to a major sports event isn't easy if you're not a big corporation, but it can be done for a price.

BY SEAN SCULLY

When Ed Damm Jr. wants to impress a client, he has a powerful weapon in his pocket: Tickets to a Philadelphia Eagles game in his luxury suite at Lincoln Financial Field.

"They've never had an experience like that before in their lives — they can't thank us enough. The whole wow factor just kicks in," said Damm, the general manager of Accu Staffing Service Inc. in Cherry Hill.

Elaborate luxury seating is available at all of the area sports venues, though it will cost you. The Wachovia Center,

home of the Flyers and 76ers, has suites ranging from \$47,000 to \$180,000 per season. Citizens Bank Park, home of the Phillies, has 69 suites at \$135,000 to \$215,000.

Lincoln Financial Field, home of the Eagles, has sold out all of its 172 suites, which range in price from \$90,000 to \$300,000. Its luxury seating is leased on contracts for five, seven and 10 years, but some will come available next year.

The suites account for 15 to 20 percent of ticket revenue every year at the Phillies' park, says Kevin Beale, manager of suite sales for the Phillies.

"It's a big deal" for the teams, Beale says. "It definitely is a big part of the funding we have here for the ballpark."

It's also a big deal for the companies that buy into the suites.

"It's just our way of saying thank you for your business and hope we can get more business from them," Damm says.



THE BEST SEATS IN THE HOUSE

Lincoln Financial Field/Eagles

172 luxury suites
10,828 club seats
215-339-6700

Wachovia Center/Flyers and 76ers

126 luxury suites
1,800 club box seats
215-389-9500

Citizens Bank Park/Phillies

72 luxury suites (only 69 are available for lease)
1,100 Diamond Club seats
2,500 Hall of Fame Club seats
215-463-5000

The facilities are similar at all three venues. The suites typically hold 18 to 25 people, with several rows of seats — all more luxurious than the standard seats — and a bar area, with refrigerators, counters and bar stools overlooking the field. All have glass windows that can close off at least part of the suite to pro-

that has suites at both the Wachovia Center and Citizens Bank Park. “The bathroom’s there, the food’s there, the drinks are there.”

Food and drink are the key. All three venues provide catering services, and suite holders can order just about anything.

“For a few games they’ll really do it up — where they have their biggest client in there and they’ll have the shrimp and steak,” Beale says. “But for the majority of folks, they’ll generally order cheesesteaks, burgers, chicken fingers — ballpark fare.”

So how do you get such a top level seat if you don’t have \$200,000 lying around to spring for a season? The easiest way, of course, is to cozy up to an existing suite holder.

While there are a handful of individuals who own suites — the venues won’t identify them — most suite holders are big companies with clients to entertain.

“We’ll bring families, we tell them bring families along, it’s a family outing,” Spinelli says. “We’re not talking about work — we’re just having a good

time. It’s kind of a thank-you entertainment.”

Don’t have a contact? There is hope.

First, all three venues offer a handful of single-event party suites for rent to large groups.



The Wachovia Center, for example, holds back three or four suites for groups and even sells individual tickets for games and events.

“You might pay a premium, but we want to keep fresh customers coming through and experiencing it,” said Joe Croce, senior vice president of sales for the Wachovia Center. “So when a suite does open up we have customers who have experienced it and line up to buy it.”

Those one-time-only suite packages can range from \$1,500 to \$5,000 per game, depending on the event. Croce said the venue sold a \$20,000 suite package for the NCAA tournament games that included food and an open bar. For some family events, such as a circus or ice skating shows, suites can go for as little as \$500, including popcorn and hotdogs.

The venues also have less expensive club seats, which feature some of the same amenities as suites, such as designated restrooms and concession stands, but are not as intimate, luxurious or protected from weather and crowd noise. Most of these seats require a season-ticket commitment.

It is possible to get luxury suites for special events at Lincoln Financial Field and Citizens Bank Park, provided the main suite holder decided not to attend. The suite owners have first rights to tickets for playoff games, college games and special events like concerts, but if the suite holder declines, the teams can resell the spot to other customers. Prices for that vary widely.

Getting tickets to individual games for the Phillies and Eagles can be more challenging.

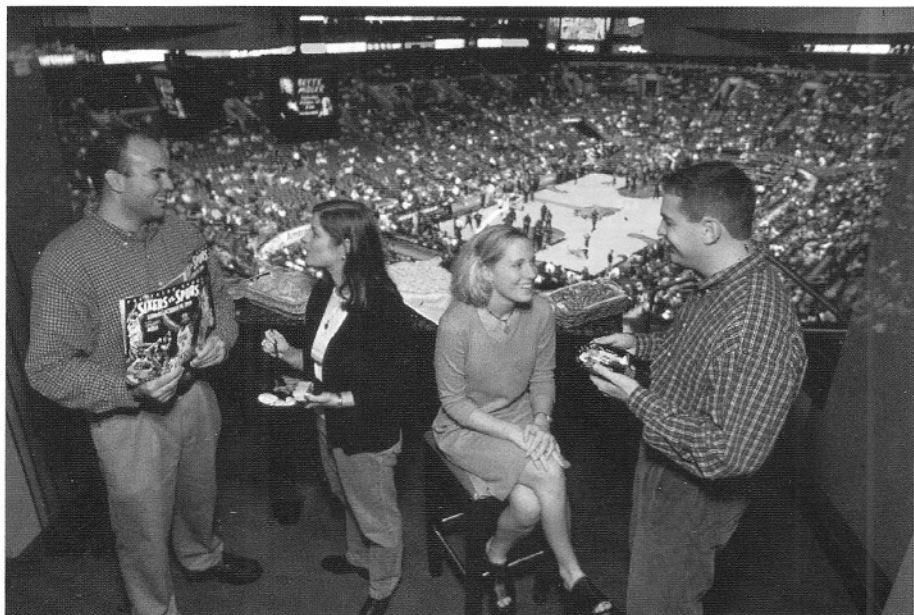
All the venues require long-term leases for suites, usually in increments of three, five and 10 years, though all the venues allow some amount of sharing — multiple companies can share a suite. But the venues tend to discourage companies from reselling tickets on the open market.



CURT HUDSON

tect spectators from weather or crowd noise. They also have private bathrooms.

“It’s a great party venue because everything is self contained,” says Jim Spinelli, general manager of Anro Inc., a printing and communications company in Devon



"We don't want to see it on the third-party market, on the eBays of the world," Beale says. "We do not allow that with our suite holders. We'd kind of keep it more of a corporate, family atmosphere."

That doesn't mean that ticket brokers can't get their hands on a certain number of luxury seats.

Scot Tobias, president of Event Suites and of Worldwide Tickets in Cherry Hill, sells hard-to-get tickets to just about any kind of performance or sporting event.

"The suite subleasing business, I think, is on the rise and down the road there will be more and more companies looking to [sublease] suites just the way tickets have become a more traded item," says Tobias, who deals in suites at venues all over the Mid-Atlantic.

He can usually fill orders for luxury seating, though it's dependent on a tight supply.

"There's a lot of work that's involved; we're constantly looking for product, suite holders who are willing to cooperate with us," he says. "We need the supply. But we've been able to move the supply when we've had it — at a price, of course."

A suite for a Phillies game might run as much as \$3,500, up to \$3,000 for a Flyers or 76ers game, and a whopping \$25,000 for an Eagles game.

He and other brokers are working on agreements to put together long-term sharing deals, or even subcontract entire seasons, at various venues, he says.

There is even a broker out West who is working on a time-share kind of deal, in which individuals would buy into large groups that could buy a suite collectively and share it, though Tobias has not yet tried to put together such a deal on the East Coast.

However you get the seats, suite holders say, it's worth it.

Once you've experienced the privacy, convenience and comfort of a luxury box, it's tough to go back to regular seating, Spinelli says: "I would think it's very, very difficult."

And from a corporate point of view, he says, it's worth it as well. It's not only good business — it feels good to be able to give out the best seats in the house.

"When you take a customer there and they take their kids — that kid walks in there and stands there and looks down on the field, they're just like in awe," he says. "Just to see that expression on their faces, that's what makes it all worthwhile, if you think about it." ■