

The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Apr. 24, 2012

Heat-Knicks matchup worth more, moneywise, than a date with the Sixers

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CHARLES TRAINOR JR / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

A Miami Heat fan and a New York Knicks fan wave from the stands before the game in the American Airlines Arena in Miami, February 23, 2012.

As the NBA's truncated regular season winds down this week, more than a few Miamians find themselves in a confusing place: They're actually rooting for the hated New York Knicks.

The way they see it, if the Knicks win, so does the city of Miami — by setting up a first-round matchup between the Heat and New York, the franchise's fiercest rival. From ticket scalpers to hoteliers, it's a dream series — and far more lucrative than a best-of-seven set against the Philadelphia 76ers, Miami's other potential opening-round foe.

"It's like Red Sox-Yankees," said broker Michael Lipman, whose firm, Tickets of America, is located across the street from the 19,600-seat American Airlines Arena.

"The interest in that series would be huge down here. If you shake Aventura upside down, you're going to have a lot of New York driver's licenses fall out."

And those transplanted New Yorkers are willing to pay.

The best gauge of interest in any event is how expensive seats are on the secondary market. When the Heat faced the Sixers in the playoffs last spring, the average cost of tickets sold through StubHub.com for the three games held in Miami was \$110, spokeswoman Joellen Ferrer said. Miami and New York haven't met in the postseason since 2000, but when the Knicks came to town for a regular-season game in February, the average ticket ran more than \$250.

Lipman expects Heat-Knicks courtside seats would fetch upwards to \$15,000, with Big Apple-based stars like Jay-Z and Spike Lee making the trip south. But even out-of-towners who sit in the rafters will need places to stay and eat — a tantalizing prospect for hotels, bars and restaurants in both downtown Miami and South Beach.

At Brickell's Hampton Inn and Suites, New Yorkers are among the hotel's top customers, and a Heat-Knicks series would be a boon, general manager Eduardo Chapoval said.

Added Bill Talbert, CEO of the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau: “The publicity for the community is absolutely priceless.”

Granted, it takes quite a bit of spending to move the needle in South Florida’s \$260 billion economy. The latest figures from the Bureau of Economic Analysis say the region’s entertainment industry generates about \$3 billion in revenue a year, though the sub-category that includes spectator sports is so small its impact is listed as “not available.”

Measuring the economic impact of any one event can be a controversial exercise. Economists point out that spending on something like a basketball game tends to shift local dollars from one activity to the next: a family that buys Heat tickets for the playoffs may end up skipping a trip to the movies that next month. So the true impact of a Heat playoff run would probably come from tourists planning special trips to Miami for the games.

But on an microeconomic level, certain businesses — particularly those surrounding the arena — have a clear stake in the Heat’s fortunes.

“Let’s face it — Knicks fans will be staying and dining in downtown Miami and Brickell Avenue hotels and restaurants, and partying at our bars and clubs,” said Tadd Schwartz, publicist for the Downtown Development Authority.

At this point, it would be a disappointment for many if the series doesn’t materialize — the NBA included. Miami and New York are among the top ratings draws in the league, and putting those teams together produced magic in the late-’90s, when they met in the postseason for four straight years. (See: Jeff Van Gundy swinging from Alonzo Mourning’s ankles.)

And with the Heat all but locked into the Eastern Conference’s No. 2 seed, the onus is on New York (34-30) to finish ahead of Philly (33-30 entering Monday night’s action) to earn the seventh seed and a date with Miami.

As for the Heat, the franchise doesn’t have a preferred first-round opponent — at least publicly.

“It is all the same to us,” Heat president of business operations Eric Woolworth said. “We are looking forward to an exciting playoff run no matter who the opponent is.”

Miami Herald staff writer Douglas Hanks contributed to this report.