
Travel: How Chicago Cornered The Market on Big Ten Bars—To lure football fans, pubs pledge themselves to schools—but allegiance is only pigskin deep; ‘I just pretend to love Iowa’

by Bryan Gruley | 18 November 2006 | *The Wall Street Journal*

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Chicago—When the University of Michigan scored its third touchdown against Indiana University last Saturday, 200 Michigan fans at Duffy’s Tavern & Grille here leapt up and loosed a deafening cheer. Lights flashed, the Michigan fight song blared, and a man in a Wolverine costume pranced about, furry tail bouncing.

“The ultimate Michigan experience,” says Duffy’s co-owner Thomas Piazza. He plasters the place with maize-and-blue banners and promotes it as “Chicago’s Big House,” borrowing the nickname of Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor, Mich. “When we adopt a school,” he says, “we put our whole heart into it.”

But Mr. Piazza owns another bar, McGee’s Tavern & Grille, just a mile away. When the second-ranked Wolverines battle No. 1 Ohio State on Saturday, McGee’s will be selling “Buck Michigan” T-shirts and the Buckeye fight song will play while bartenders work in scarlet-and-gray.

“I have no allegiance to any football team, except the [Chicago] Bears,” says Mr. Piazza, 43 years old, who graduated from Loyola University in Chicago and, with older brother Phil,

owns three other local bars that cater to Purdue, Wisconsin and Notre Dame supporters.

Chicago, with no college gridiron power of its own, has bred one of the nation’s strongest college-football cultures. Tapping a market of more than 450,000 people aged 20 to 29, saloon keepers who align their establishments with one or more teams from the Big Ten Conference can pull in more than \$40,000 on a good football Saturday.

The bars, many of which are clustered in the city’s North Side neighborhoods, promote cut-rate cocktails and rah-rah atmosphere. They also benefit from their relationships with local alumni clubs, which sometimes get a piece of a bar’s revenue for anointing the bar an alumni hangout. McGee’s and Duffy’s have raised a total of nearly \$16,000 this year for Ohio State and Michigan alumni clubs through sales of plastic mugs and T-shirts, Mr. Piazza says. In return, the bars get plugs on the clubs’ Web sites.

With multiple bars declaring allegiances to schools, the rivalry is less Purdue vs. Michigan State, say, than Michigan State vs. Michigan State. MSU fans can

choose between the Gin Mill, with its boisterous fraternity ambiance, and Higgins’ Tavern, a quieter corner bar displaying black-and-white photos of classic Spartan games.

Some bars do little more than hang a school flag. Others strive to recreate the feel of being at the game—and sometimes miss by a little. A DJ at Duffy’s played “The Victors” whenever Michigan scored, then blasted hip-hop music rarely heard at the real Big House. The \$7, 32-ounce beer specials came in plastic mugs of white-and-blue instead of Michigan maize-and-blue. Josh Mellender, 21, a Duffy’s doorman wearing the Wolverine outfit, was asked whether he likes the Michigan team. “Not particularly,” he said.

Few bars are truer to their roots than Will’s Northwoods Inn, a smoky Wisconsin dive where the knotty-pine walls are covered with stuffed moose heads, muskies, a snapping turtle and, of course, a badger. Owner Jonathan Bunge modeled it on the taverns near his family cottage in Hayward, Wis., where, he says, “If you go in any bar, it’s a dump.”

On game days, patrons gobble free bratwurst and the white-haired Mr. Bunge, 70, grabs a microphone and raffles off hard hats, thongs, bib overalls and other red-and-white Badger paraphernalia. "I always see old classmates," says Jeremy Tiedt, 28, a Chicago attorney and Wisconsin grad sporting a red "F- 'Em Bucky" T-shirt named for the badger mascot.

After opening in 2004, Merkle's Bar & Grill hung some black-and-gold Iowa flags "and people just started pouring in," says co-owner Jason Levin, 34. He and his four partners, only one of whom is from Iowa, coveted Chicago's large Hawkeye audience. They also raised a University of Illinois flag to lure fans of the school's ranked basketball team.

Today, Merkle's is adorned with Iowa cups, helmets, basketballs, pennants, license plates and T-shirts. One recent Saturday, bartender Kristen King, 31, wore pigtails tied with gold ribbons. "I just pretend to love Iowa," she said, grinning. "That's my job."

The owners have learned a few lessons. For instance, some Iowa fans prefer not to hear their beloved team polka, "In Heaven There Is No Beer," until an Iowa victory is assured. "I started to play it once in the middle of a game and people were throwing things at me and screaming to turn it off," Mr. Levin says. With an official capacity of just 72, Merkle's can gross \$15,000 in revenue on a good day, he says.

Alumni clubs can help. Many encourage members to attend "gamewatches" at select bars listed on club Web sites. When Michael Jerit and two partners opened Mickeys Bar & Patio two years ago, they hired OSU graduates and dressed the barmaids in tight-fitting

Buckeye jerseys. This year, they sought the alumni club's blessing.

"They sent a guy over and he asked a lot of questions," says Mr. Jerit, a trim, spiky-haired 30-year-old who didn't attend Ohio State but has been a Buckeye fan since boyhood. He offered the club 15% of revenue the bar collects while Ohio State games are on. Mickeys joined McGee's as the only two city bars on the club Web site. Club President Karen Webber, a 1999 OSU grad, says the \$15,000 raised by the bars so far this season will help underwrite scholarships for Chicago-area students.

Last Saturday, Ohio State fan Matt Morgan drove from Ohio for a Mickeys tailgater before the Buckeye game at nearby Northwestern University. He and his father-in-law, Jim Probasco, had planned to go to the McGee's tailgater -- until they learned the owner, Mr. Piazza, also has a Michigan bar. "Business is business," Mr. Probasco says, "but it just doesn't feel right."

Mr. Piazza, a burly man with a wide smile, chuckled at the criticism while sitting amid the varnished wood stools and dozens of TVs at McGee's earlier this week. "We're not here to fight, we're here to have fun," he said. In another room, his staff prepared for today's Michigan-Ohio State clash. The game plan included a side-by-side newspaper ad for "Kegs and Eggs" at McGee's and "Big House Breakfast" at Duffy's.

Mr. Piazza and his brother, who attended Chicago's DePaul University, bought McGee's in 1987 and slowly built a University of Nebraska following. As they added bars to their company, Bar1Events, the Piazzas dedicated each to a single college, thinking they'd attract a more devoted clientele.

"It developed into something that's kind of loyalty and kind of business," Mr. Piazza says. After losing the lease on Jack Sullivan's, their popular Ohio State tavern, the Piazzas this year rechristened McGee's as a Buckeye bar, ditching Nebraska. Mr. Piazza says his bigger bars—such as Duffy's, with an official capacity of 199—can bring in \$30,000 to \$45,000 on a strong day.

Saturday could easily be one of those. Duffy's and McGee's are scheduled to open more than five hours before the 3:30 p.m. EST kickoff. And who will win the biggest college game of the year? Mr. Piazza declines to make a prediction, saying, "I don't want to make anybody mad."

The Roster

Chicago has a bar for every Big Ten fan. Here is a sampling of them.

Illinois

Schoolyard Tavern & Grill

3258 N. Southport

Indiana

Hi-Tops,

3551 N. Sheffield

Iowa

Merkle's Bar & Grill

3516 N. Clark

Michigan

Duffy's Tavern & Grille

4201/2 W. Diversey

Michigan State

Higgins' Tavern

3259 N. Racine

Minnesota

The Ivy on Clark

3462 N. Clark

Northwestern

Mullen's on Clark

3527 N. Clark

Ohio State

Mickeys Bar & Patio

2450 N. Clark

Penn State

Dark Horse Tap & Grill

3443 N. Sheffield

Purdue

Durkin's Tavern

810 W. Diversey

Wisconsin

Will's Northwoods Inn

3030 N. Racine

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