

# The hat trick

The Lewiston MAINEiacs hockey franchise upped game attendance, energized the fan base, and brought home the cup

BY JOE FITZGERALD



It was 2003, and the Sherbrooke Castors of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League had just moved south of the border to become the Lewiston MAINEiacs in a community with next to no awareness of the QMJHL. The fledgling franchise faced a steep climb to win the hearts and minds of fans. "People identified us as the equivalent of high school hockey rather than the premier development system for the NHL," says Matt McKnight, the president and governor of the leagues' only American franchise. "I think it was because of the age group of our players."

Other issues dogged the club, including delays in promised renovations to bring the team's arena up to league standards. The City of Lewiston eventually stepped in and took over the facility to ensure the renovations were finished, but the first year was a struggle. "We were asking a lot of the fans," admits McKnight. "They were buying tickets from a trailer in the parking lot. We were making it very difficult for them to get exposed to the product."

But in 2004, a young phenom named Sidney Crosby entered the league with the Rimouski Oceanic. While Crosby didn't help the MAINEiacs on the ice, his meteoric rise through the league certainly got people's attention. "I'm not shy to say we leveraged Sidney Crosby," says McKnight. "We knew once we got people in the building that our product would sell itself."

Finally, last year the MAINEiacs refocused its marketing campaign. "It was based on the concept of Quest for the Cup," says McKnight. "It's no secret—there's no better marketing tactic than a winning hockey team, but that's still only about 60% of the battle. The other 40% is giving fans entertainment and value for their dollar."

The MAINEiacs' Quest for the Cup was divided into three stages. The first encompassed season ticket drives, group sales, and sponsorships in the off season. The goal was to instill a shared belief of winning the championship between players



and fans alike. "We weren't trying to sell a myth," says McKnight. "We were using the same strategy in our dressing room with the players."

Throughout the regular season, the campaign addressed the challenge of the fan base. "We were having a hard time with the casual fan base," says McKnight. "For a building of this size, with 3,677 seats, we've got 1,800 season ticket holders, so we're half full on season tickets. It was getting that walk-up fan to come out to five or six games instead of one or two."

That led to the Last Fan Standing contest. When attendance hits 3,000 in Lewiston every fan stands up, and sections, rows, and seats are drawn. Fans sitting in sections drawn must sit down until there is only one person left standing, who wins \$1,000 in cash. "We put money back into the hands of the people who support us," says McKnight.

As the team geared up for the playoffs, it became Quest for the Cup: We Believe. During the playoff run, banners were hung all over the city, including at City Hall. "As a city, we are very supportive," says Lewiston Mayor Laurent F. Gilbert, Sr. "The Lewiston MAINEiacs games bring the community together, especially in winter."

The Lewiston MAINEiacs posted a 16-1 record in the QMJHL playoffs in 2007 and realized their quest by winning the league's President's Cup. Off the ice, annual attendance dramatically increased by 28%, and the Quest for the Cup campaign generated a buzz in the community that is likely to reverberate for seasons to come. "The headlines in the local daily were like World War II had just ended," says McKnight. "It was incredible." 