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Even with little interest in travel packages, UW game is boon for businesses

Back-to-back Rose Bowl appearances by the University of Wisconsin Badgers may have tempered the enthusiasm of football fans mulling Jan. 2 sojourns to Pasadena, Calif., but there is plenty of love for Bucky in Ozaukee County's business community.

WISCONSIN BADGER IMAGES have been a popular item at the newly opened Sports Images & More shop in Port Washington. Anticipating UW's Rose Bowl appearance was Mike Gostomski, who stood next to an enlarged photo of Camp Randall Stadium. Photo by Mark Jaeger

The staff at Biever Travel in Port Washington report having "a lot of inquiries" about package deals to Pasadena, but they haven't logged any sales yet.

Most people are scared off by the $2,200 price tag. Other die-hard fans may have paid a similar tab when UW took on Texas Christian in the Rose Bowl last January and can't afford another trip in 2012.

The travel agency reports they haven't had any inquiries yet about arrangements for a trip to Indianapolis, where Green Bay Packers fans are convinced their team will be playing in their second consecutive Super Bowl.

Still, sports fanaticism can be a lucrative business this time of year.

Port Washington residents Mike Gostomski and Lisa Kien managed to hitch a ride on the Badger tidal wave when they opened Sports Images & More in the Shoppes of Port Washington building on the weekend following Thanksgiving.

That was before the Badgers football team earned its return trip to the Rose Bowl by defeating

the Michigan State Spartans in the first-ever Big Ten championship game.

The title game and its proximity to peak gift-giving season has been a real boon for the new business owners.

The store specializes in high-resolution game images printed on canvas, along with an assortment of clothing and decor that pays tribute to local sports teams.

“Sales were really strong leading up to Christmas. The Badger items have been very popular, especially the image we have of Bucky smelling a red rose,” Gostomski said.

“Hopefully, we’ll be able to keep this up through the Rose Bowl, and then — if we’re lucky — we’ll concentrate on Packers items leading up to the Super Bowl. Then it will be time to shift gears and get ready for the baseball season. It looks like there will be strong fan support for the Brewers again this season.”

The Badgers may be the big story around here in the days before the Rose Bowl with the Oregon Ducks, but Gostomski said the Packers are a big seller any time of year.

He has experience working at similar sports-themed shops to back up that observation.

“Actually, you’d be surprised but we have found there is pretty strong interest in Chicago Bears items, too,” Gostomski said the day after a Christmas drubbing of the Monsters of the Midway by the Packers.

“You might think that is from tourists who just happen see our pictures in the window, but I know for a fact some of the Bears stuff was purchased by locals.”

The cooperative nature of the Shoppes of Port Washington setting is ideal for the business, which does not have a full-time staff.

“It has really worked out well for us because we look out for each other. We’ve sold Packers earrings for the jewelry maker who has space in the building, and the other owners are always willing to make a sale for us if we aren’t in,” Kein said.

Other stores have found bowl game enthusiasm is fanning the flames of commerce.

While probably not topping the sales of champagne and red-and-green M&Ms at the store, Rose Bowl T-shirts and sweatshirts have been very popular items at Port Washington’s Shopko Express.

“We sold a lot of UW shirts for Christmas. In fact, we ran out of some sizes,” said one sales clerk.

Nancy Brown of Brown’s Floral & Gifts hasn’t seen a big surge in rose sales in advance of the Rose Bowl game, but she has a fondness for the pomp surrounding the Pasadena event,

especially the Tournament of Roses Parade.

“I worked on a float one year, and it was an amazing experience,” Brown said.

“There is a section of warehouses that are dedicated to float building, and the day after the parade the float builders are already planning what they want to do for next year.”

As for the floral theme of the football game, that appeal only goes so far.

“Being in Wisconsin, I think people are more concerned about buying beer and cheese for their Rose Bowl parties than they are about buying roses,” Brown admitted.