

OUR LUCKY CALLER AN UNWANTED PRIZE.

By David Puner

If you happened to be listening to WFAN at around 4 p.m. on the first Tuesday of this month, you would have heard Mike Francesa, the world's No. 1 authority on everything, say two things of note. The first gem was unadulterated, ad-libbed razzle-dazzle within a live commercial for the Bermuda Department of Tourism: "You could be out in the ver-an-der right now, ov-ah-looking the watah," Francesa said dreamily in his thick, Long Island/gouda burr.

The second important note hit straight out of another break: "Dave from Manhattan wins the Blitz."

Loopy on office coffee and hours of Mike and his dawg, I had impulsively dialed The FAN and, beating unknown odds, was the seventh caller, which made me the purported winner...of Nets tickets. After hanging up, I didn't feel like a winner. I had called The FAN with neither question nor comment for either sports guru, and yet still parted with a prize.



From radio to phone to Port Authority bus terminal to joyless arena on top of a paved-over New Jersey swamp, I wound up spending an evening watching the Nets' horrible home opener (a 110-96 loss to the Milwaukee Bucks), all because I was caller No. 7. I've lived in Manhattan for a decade and, until opening night, had never been to a Nets game or won anything from The FAN. I will not be so quick to dial again.

One problem was my second ticket. I figured it wouldn't be difficult to unload a freebie.

"You take a bus?" asked a naïve friend from Brooklyn. "Do they give you food vouchers?" asked another. "I've got yoga," was my wife's excuse. "I owe you a trip to the zoo or something equally awful," another friend wrote in his declining email (signing off with the timely, yet ironic, "Alito" stamp). Nobody, it seems, was up for a trip out to Jersey. So I went by myself.

The Nets are good. The team's big three (Vince Carter, Jason Kidd, Richard Jefferson) are good. The team has realistic playoff expectations. The Nets are a team, as my

seatmate on the 351 NJ Transit bus to the Meadowlands told me, that nobody gives a shit about.

Maybe nobody gives a shit about the Nets because it's an NBA team without a city, I offered. Why bother investing your emotions in a team that you know is going to divorce you? Maybe nobody gives a shit because the team is moving to Brooklyn in 2007 and there's something decidedly lame duck about the franchise, I suggested.

Nah, said my seatmate (whose ticket, it turns out, was also a freebie). "The Nets won't draw anyway," he explained as he jiggled his gold watch, shooting stray beams of interior light around the bus cabin. He ended his argument by offering the same verdict: "No one gives a shit." Even in winning, it seems, the Nets lose.

Riding the Meadowlands' bus is surprisingly easy (although finding the Port Authority gate is not) and takes about 20 minutes in rush-hour traffic. Unlike driving oneself to the Meadowlands which, much like nearby Newark Liberty airport, is a complex of rerouted traffic and poorly marked chaos, the bus conveniently stops next to a mountain of silt mixed with broken-up concrete. On opening night, enormous yellow excavators were parked atop the man-made mountain, light from the arena making the menacing machines look as if they were lifeless lunar-roving vehicles. Development has begun on Meadowlands' Xanadu, hailed by the good folks in the Meadowlands' PR dept. as someday being "the ultimate sports, leisure, family entertainment and shopping complex in the United States." The Nets' future does not rest in Xanadu.

Once inside, I received a promotional, bright-red Nets cap with BRING IT, apparently the team's 2005–2006 official slogan, embroidered on the back strap. A food voucher would have been of much better use to me. I then found my \$100 seat and brought it to the back row of the arena's first level. I no longer could feel at all good about being caller No. 7. Now I was just a guy with an overpriced seat far away from the court.

"Ladies and gentlemen—your 2005–2006 New Jersey Nets!" the public address announcer declared. With this deafening cry, the arena's audiovisual bombardment commenced without abatement for the game's duration—the volume is, in fact, even cranked up when the Nets have ball possession. Talk about an unfair advantage in professional sports. Who wouldn't have an edge with a "Funky Cold Medina" infusion?

With the Nets up 13-3 and about six minutes left in the first quarter, fans greeted a time-out with a smattering of applause. Moments later, the applause meter rose ten-fold when a spirited dance brigade, creatively known as "The Nets Dancers," stormed onto the court with some highly stylized moves and costumes (think Knicks City Dancers with Bada Bing deference). And by moves and costumes, of course I mean panache and verve.

The Continental Airlines Arena, when filled to capacity, holds 20,098 fans. If the arena is filled to capacity (which, despite an official sell-out, it clearly wasn't) and the announcer instructs: "New Jersey fans, put your hands in the sky and make some noise," around 40,000 hands would feasibly be available to be raised toward the arena roof. When the command came down on opening night, quick inspection did not catch one intentional hand in the air. The fans didn't care enough to put their hands in the air like they just didn't care.

At the end of the first quarter, with the Nets up 29-17, the mascot, Sly Fox (full name: Sly, the Silver Fox), came bounding onto the court in what seemed to be an amphetamine-fueled haze. Mr. Fox wears the No. 1 on the back of his jersey, in tribute perhaps to the IQ of the marketing genius who created him. But who doesn't love an enormous dunking Fox? Answer: Nets fans. Foxy jumps off a small trampoline and dunks the ball to the non-delight of fans throughout the arena. On opening night, the

silver fox saved his blandest dunk for last. Someone will, undoubtedly, explain grand finale to Foxy before he moves out of the swamp.

By halftime, the Bucks had cut the Nets' lead to three points. While the Nets retreated to their locker room to gain insight into the chipping away of their early lead, fans were in for a special half-time performance from Def Jam recording artist Rihanna. After a few minutes of Rihanna bopping about, my baggy-clad, sideways-cap-wearing seatmate offered his assessment of the performance: "This shit is garbage."

Maybe it was Rihanna, the fox's mojo or impending Xanadu but, shortly into the third quarter, the Nets had thoroughly lost their lead and soon were down by a million points. When the Bucks decided to play with their arms tied behind their backs and allow 37-year-old Croat Toni Kukoc to hit the floor, I decided it was time to hit the road. It was about the same time that I received a text message from one of my invitees. "Hope you are out enjoying the Nets," it read. "I've just finished a delicious chicken pot pie and I'm getting ready to violate myself and head off to bed." These were simple pleasures, I thought, joys one can't win in a ticket blitz. I wanted to go home.

After waiting a half-hour for the bus to fill and I finally left for New York with a load of hushed strangers wearing Nets' BRING IT hats.

The next day, I couldn't bring myself to listen to The FAN. Heavily under the influence of Q104.3 I did however, check out the Nets' website. The "Nets Photo of the Day" was of Rihanna, and the caption read, "Def Jam recording artist Rihanna electrified the crowd on opening night." And then it all made sense: winning tickets from The FAN had metaphorically electrocuted me—the tickets were the hairdryer; the Continental Airlines Arena was the bathtub. I will not dial WFAN again, for fear of winning.

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