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AHL ALL-STAR CHALLENGES ALLENTOWN

Spectra and Lehigh Valley Phantoms add Fanfest and Tailgate parties to make it a 3-day event

At the American Hockey League All-Star Challenge at the PPL Center in Allentown, Pa., are Spectra's Linda Recke and Gunnar Fox; Jim and Rob Brooks, co-owners, Lehigh Valley Phantoms; Dave Andrews, Commissioner, American Hockey League; and Spectra's John Wentzell and Tim Murphy. (Photo Courtesy: Spectra by Comcast Spectacor)

The American Hockey League (AHL) All-Star Classic starred Lehigh Valley and the impact the three-year-old PPL Center, Allentown, Pa., has had on revitalization of downtown, as far as Rob Brooks, co-owner of the Lehigh Valley Phantoms hockey team is concerned.

Gunnar Fox, general manager of the venue for Spectra by Comcast Spectacor, and Chris Porreca from the Phantoms, led the charge in planning the entire Jan. 28-30 weekend, which was expanded from two to three days with addition of a Fanfest and Tailgate Party. With the Skills Games and All-Star Challenge, the entire weekend drew 26,000 people to downtown.

Planning took a year and to execute the task, Spectra and the Phantoms established 11 committees tasked with every detail, from the welcoming committee to make sure fans were greeted at the airport and hotels to VIP reception, pre-event, governors party, league liaison, marketing, Fanfest and Tailgate committees. There was even an Executive Game Committee (held on Monday, in which Fox played).

In all, 35-40 people were involved in the planning, Fox said.

The highlight for Fox was to hear the feedback from different people in the league. "I talked to Dave Andrews [AHL Commissioner] the last night after the game," Fox said. "To hear all of that hard work was appreciated and that it showed was the highlight."

Both the Skills and All-Star Games sold out the 8,500 seat arena. Fanfest and the Tailgate party combined drew over 9,000.

Brooks, who has owned the team since 2009, and is enjoying his third season at PPL Center and always meant for PPL Center to be a catalyst for revitalization of downtown Allentown, the third largest city in the state. It has worked, he said.

"It feels good. There is a heartstring to it," he said showcasing the \$1.5 billion in downtown development over the last several years. "We wanted to show off the Lehigh Valley and show off downtown Allentown. For two nights, with no NHL games, we had visibility in over 100 million households on TV. It's a really fun story."

The team was the primary contract signer for the AHL All-Star Game. Brooks said he is hoping to turn a slight profit, but that wasn't the driver.

He was particularly pleased that the new events, Fanfest and the Tailgate Party, exposed a lot of people to the sport and the venue and anticipates a bump in season and regular ticket sales as a result.

Tickets for the main events were priced \$18-\$50. Season ticketholders paid extra but kept first rights to their seats. Suiteholders kept their suites without additional cost. The venue has 26 suites.

Fanfest drew 4,600, who bought \$5 tickets. The event was produced in house. "We rented a lot of equipment," Brooks said.

The Tailgate Party featured 27 mostly local craft beers. The microbrewfest also drew 4,600 paying \$10 each.

The Phantoms handled merchandise and sold replica game jerseys during the All-Star game. It was a huge risk, Brooks said. The jerseys were a high price point, \$130, so they only ordered 150 of them. It turns out they sold out quickly. "Maybe I could have ordered more," he reflected.

"We've set the bar high," Brooks said of future AHL All-Star Games.

"We hit out of the park; everyone left thinking what a great experience they had," Fox said. "We wanted to create an experience and have it be a memory that lasts a lifetime."