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Jim was quoted in an article in ColoradoBiz magazine

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Sports Biz
On the house
By Stewart Schley

There's an old business axiom about not giving away the house. Apparently nobody shared it with Jim Harmon.

Harmon is a longtime Colorado Avalanche supporter who has decided the proper way to celebrate the team's 10th season is to give away a house. Not just any old house. A freshly constructed row home in the residential development his company, Amber Homes Inc., is building in Commerce City.

The development is called Bonnyview at Aberdeen, and the home model is "The McGraw," which spans 1,521 square feet, offers two master-bedroom suites with walk-in closets and, if Harmon weren't so all-fired crazy about the Avalanche, would normally fetch about \$183,000.

But it's yours for free if you happen to be the Avalanche game attendee or online registrant who's selected at random to win the thing between now and the end of the season.

Harmon is one of 10 Avalanche sponsors who are contributing prizes and goods worth around \$500,000 to a "fan appreciation" contest that celebrates the team's Colorado anniversary this season. The fan giveaways include a three-night getaway at The Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas, 10 free round-trip flights from Frontier Airlines Inc., a motorcycle from Rocky Mountain Harley-Davidson, and a pool table and six-person hot tub from Denver-based Pool Table Warehouse and Cal Spas.

The contest is pure publicity-stunt material for the Avalanche and owner Kroenke Sports Enterprises, which introduced Avalanche president and general manager Pierre LaCroix and showered sponsors in a blast of confetti when it unveiled the promotion in September. "This is possibly the biggest giveaway in the history of professional sports," boomed Avs radio announcer Mike Haynes at the press conference.

If only they kept statistics.

But after taking a year off because of a gloomy National Hockey League labor dispute, the Avalanche and owner Kroenke Sports Entertainment hope to restore a remarkable reservoir of fan support that has buoyed the team since its arrival in Colorado in 1995. The Avalanche has sold out every home game since November of that debut year.

For sponsors like Harmon, contributing a substantial asset into the sports-team promotion reflects a gut-level mix of business logic and raw emotion that is peculiar to the world of sports marketing.

Just about everywhere else, advertising is subjected to increasingly precise levels of measurement. Overnight Nielsen TV ratings, Internet click-through responses and newspaper circulation audits provide a sort of scorecard of which ad vehicles win and lose in the modern media era. But sports sponsorships remain partly rooted in hunch, intuition and faith.

Harmon, who says he spends about \$1 million a year on more traditional advertising and marketing efforts, figures intuitively that Amber Homes will get reasonable exposure from the free-home giveaway without carving deeply into his cash advertising budget. Other than contributing the two-story home, “no money is changing hands,” says Harmon. And even if he can’t put an exact number on it, Harmon figures he’ll get the Amber Homes name out there. “This type of thing reaches a large number of people,” he says.

But sports sponsorships depend on more than just raw numerology. Harmon, for example, was drawn to the Avalanche fan-appreciation contest partly because he loves the team and the general good-guy vibe of hockey. Harmon, who founded Aurora-based Amber Homes in 1998, has supported Avalanche-related charity efforts for years, and counts former Avalanche player Shjon Podein, who Harmon met at a fundraising dinner, among his closest friends.

In addition to name exposure, Harmon is counting on the sort of positive brand spillover that many sponsors believe they derive from an association with sports teams and athletes. “Sports people generally tend to be regarded in a positive light,” says Harmon. “The greatest people I know are hockey players.”

A similar feel-good instinct led Jerry Kern to put up one of the 10 prizes. Kern, who manages Lakewood-based Pool Table Warehouse, has agreed to give away an \$8,500 pool table to an Avalanche fan. Unlike Harmon, Kern says he doesn’t advertise much. He relies mostly on word-of-mouth marketing to bring in customers. But as an Avalanche season-ticket holder since 1995, Kern is well aware of the link between sports fans and deals. He and his wife Diane have treated customers to their private Avalanche tickets for years. “You buy a pool table from us,” he says, “and you get your choice of games.”

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