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NBA Playoffs: Why Indiana Pacers Fans Aren't Showing Up to Games

By Josh Sanburn | May 17, 2012 | Add a Comment

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The Indiana Pacers haven't been this good in almost a decade, and on Thursday night, the Miami Heat will come to Indiana for Game 3 of the NBA Playoffs. But will Pacers fans even attend?

It's been a long road for the Pacers franchise since that ugly night in Detroit in 2004. As soon as a handful of Pacers entered the stands that evening and brawled with fans and Pistons players, they waved goodbye to years of building toward winning an NBA championship. Ron Artest alone was suspended for 73 games that season, and the team lost any hope of competing for a title.

A couple years later they lost Reggie Miller, who retired after 18 years and was the face of the franchise. Afterwards, they were bottom dwellers, catfish in the Eastern Conference's Central Division. They posted one of their worst seasons in 2006-07, when they finished 35-47.

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But since then, they've been on a successful rebuilding track. Under the leadership of Larry Bird, who won NBA Executive of the Year Wednesday, they've acquired a number of promising young players, including 7-2 center Roy Hibbert, the athletic Paul George, and some quality reserves in Darren Collison and Tyler Hansbrough.

This season was a break-out year for the Pacers, finishing third in the Eastern Conference and handily beating the Orlando Magic four games to one in the first round of the playoffs.

You would think that this year, finally, their attendance figures would be through the roof. Let's face it: basketball is practically a religion in Indiana. So every game's probably sold out at Bankers Life Fieldhouse, which by the way is a great place to watch a ballgame. Right?

It turns out that the Pacers have the the second-to-worse attendance figures in the NBA. The only team that drew fewer fans than the Pacers is [the New Jersey Nets](#). And they're leaving the state next season.

During the regular season, the Pacers averaged 14,168 fans per game, just a couple hundred more than the last-place Nets. That means about one of every five seats in Bankers Life was empty this season.

Over the last six years, the Pacers have been in the bottom four in attendance every year and have finished dead last twice – including last year. So what's going on?

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Most commentators have offered one fundamental answer: [the Pacers don't have a star](#). The de facto leader of the



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The Arena entrance as seen before Game Five of the Eastern Conference Quarterfinals between the Indiana Pacers and the Orlando Magic during the 2012 NBA Playoffs on May 8, 2012 at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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team is Danny Granger, a no-nonsense, multi-talented small forward who scores about 20 points and grabs 5 rebounds a game. He's become one of the most improved players in league history and is the only NBA player ever to increase his points per game by 5 points each season for four consecutive years.

But there's nothing flashy about Granger, or the rest of the Pacers, for that matter. He's an efficient player who simply gets the job done. He's the Indiana Pacers' version of Tim Duncan. Just pull up any Danny Granger highlight reel on YouTube and you'll find a bunch of unemotional mid-range jumpers and layups. Like [this one](#).

Much of the Pacers' team is just like Granger – a whole array of reserved Tim Duncan types. But can that really be the reason Indiana fans aren't attending games?

Unfortunately, some of the problem may be from fans who are still nursing a decade-long hangover from the ugliness that was the Detroit brawl. Artest and Jermaine O'Neal, both suspended after the fight, were never terribly popular in Indiana following an era that included the likes of Reggie Miller, Rik Smits and Detlef Schrempf. They were too hard-edged, too bad-boy for most Pacers fans. The brawl only solidified those impressions and pushed a good number of Hoosiers away from the franchise.

The Pacers' marketing has also been criticized for not getting enough people within the state excited about the team. David Stern even [addressed the issue of Pacers attendance](#) during the first round of the playoffs, saying: "It's being addressed by much more aggressive marketing ... and I think you'll see another continued uptick next year."

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In a state where basketball dominates, the Pacers have always felt as if they were on the third tier in the basketball hierarchy. In die-hard fan support across the state, they often fall behind college teams like the Indiana Hoosiers and even the Purdue Boilermakers. And believe it or not, high school basketball is still incredibly popular (come on, you've seen *Hoosiers*) and the tournament is one of the most attended in the nation every year.

Whatever the reason, Indiana fans will regret not watching this team if they end up making it past the Miami Heat in the playoffs. They're a solid club, one that plays tough defense and rebounds the ball. It's the kind of style true Hoosiers should love. And with Miami's Chris Bosh out and the series tied at 1-1 after Game 2, the Pacers now have a legitimate shot to advance to the Eastern Conference Finals.

Still, even as the Pacers prepare for their biggest game of the season, Bankers Life Fieldhouse might have some empty seats. According to the *Indianapolis Star*, [more than 1,200 seats were available](#) for Thursday's game on StubHub as of Wednesday afternoon.

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