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Norcross firm just the ticket for pricey events

By **BILL TORPY**
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The Final Four is over. The Masters has come and gone. And now corporations and well-heeled sports fans are eyeing the next big event on their horizon: the Kentucky Derby.

Instead of surfing the Internet or calling scalpers to fix them up with tickets, those wanting to indulge themselves in "the most exciting two minutes in sports" can call a Norcross firm hired by Churchill Downs to peddle some of its tickets.



Patti Longmire/AP
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This 2005 file photo shows the 133rd Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Ky.



Becky Stein/AJC
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Brian Learst heads Quint Events, the official provider of Kentucky Derby tickets. The firm is based in Norcross.

Quint Events made a name for itself in the "sports experience" industry by selling 7,500 tickets, coupled with hotel rooms and amenities, for the 2005 Super Bowl in Jacksonville, helping the Jaguars fund a massive stadium renovation.

This year, Quint is the Derby's "exclusive, official ticket and hospitality provider," said company President Brian Learst, sitting in the conference room of Quint, located in a small office park.

The arrangement is a new wrinkle sports teams and events are increasingly using to boost revenue — and avoid appearances of scalping, observers say — by providing one-stop shopping for fans with deep pockets. It is the first time the Derby has entered such an arrangement. Quint will sell about 1,000 tickets to the May 3 event.

The seats aren't cheap. A ticket to Millionaire's Row coupled with a three-day hotel (double occupancy), hospitality and ground transportation package was listed on Quint's Web site for \$8,999. Drop the luxury hotel and it's \$4,999 for a race day ticket, coupled with hospitality and a gift bag containing binoculars, a digital camera, a rain slicker, flip-flops and suntan oil.

A grandstand ticket is \$2,499 with double occupancy in a hotel, or \$1,799 for race day. Those packages recently sold out.

List price for the Derby's 56,000 reserved seats range from \$88 to \$690 for Millionaire's Row, said a Churchill Downs ticketing agent. (An additional 100,000 fans pack the infield.) But "list price" and what you actually pay are often two different things.

Most reserved tickets are sold by the track directly to season ticket holders, contractors, sponsors and others with long-term relationships, said Tom Schneider, Churchill Downs' vice president of guest services. He said the track is besieged by people each year seeking tickets and accommodations. But such packages are outside the track's expertise.

Derby officials put out the word they needed someone to market some tickets, and Quint beat out about 15 competitors for the contract, partly because of its track record with the National Football League, Schneider said. With annual revenue of \$30 million, Quint employs 25 to 30 workers in Norcross and Charlotte.

"They aren't scalpers. They aren't brokers," he said. "They offer high-end sports experience packages."

Companies looking to woo VIPs will pay more for tickets if they are "bundled" with hotels, limos and hospitality, said Craig Depken, an economics professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who has studied scalping.

"The sum is worth more than the parts," he said.

Packaging is not exactly scalping, Depken said. Still, "it's a way of Churchill Downs extracting more value for that ticket from the consumer. It's more difficult to accuse someone of scalping tickets because they are selling a package, selling a bundle or an experience."

Neither Quint nor Churchill Downs would disclose the specifics of their business arrangement.

"We're buying the tickets from them and sharing the benefits with them," Learst said. "The goal is to grow the program and [in the future] increase the number of seats and hotels."

Kentucky has an anti-scalping law, but the Internet has made geography nearly moot. Quint ran into problems earlier this year with Churchill Downs after the Louisville Courier-Journal disclosed that John Langbein, a partner at Quint, was president of an Arizona firm that was listing marked-up Derby tickets on its Web site.

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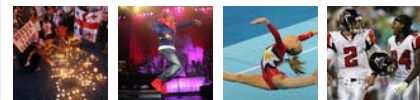
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Schneider said the Arizona firm removed the tickets from its site, and that Churchill Downs is now happy with the arrangement.

For other events, Quint gobbles up prime tickets on the secondary market as the centerpiece of the packages it offers.

"There will always be that secondary market," Learst said, referring to tickets sold by others after the initial, and official, sale. That can mean scalpers, brokers, Web sites or even people selling to neighbors.

How do tickets end up on that market? Learst laughed and said: "I don't know how it happens. It's simply supply and demand. There's a limited number of the best seats. It's probably one of the purest markets out there."

The Internet has "changed everything" in the secondary ticket business, he said. "There's no secret to how much tickets cost."

He said people always remark on the markup of tickets but don't take into account the risks involved.

"It's tougher than you think. There's a lot of logistics, a lot of moving parts," he said. For the Super Bowl in Jacksonville, "we went out and bought 5,000 hotel rooms from Daytona to Savannah. It's almost impossible to manage it perfectly."

There are almost always hotel rooms booked but unfilled or tickets purchased on spec and sold at a loss.

Learst said he and several Quint officials will head to Louisville this week to manage the affairs of the fans: the hotel mix-ups, the catering that isn't delivered, the limousines that don't show up.

"There's an adrenaline rush," said Learst, an accountant who cut his teeth booking packages during the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. But on game day (or race day, in this case), there's no place he'd rather be.

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