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Paying the Price to Hunt In Hot-Ticket Territory

By CAROL FLAKE CHAPMAN
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WHEN my husband and I recently decided that we would like to see our favorite pro basketball team, the San Antonio Spurs, play at the Alamodome, I began searching the Web for tickets for a home game against the Los Angeles Lakers, which put us into hot-ticket (and perhaps scalpers') territory.

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I went first to the Ticketmaster site, which lets you search by category (sports, arts, music or family), venue, city or state. I clicked my way to the Spurs page and selected the game against the Lakers on Feb. 1. I filled out the application -- number of tickets, price range and means of delivery (whether they will be delivered through United Parcel Service, mailed or picked up) -- and learned that a very limited selection of seats was available.

The tickets were \$35 each, plus a convenience charge of \$4.35 each and a handling charge of \$2.65, making a total of \$81.35 for the two tickets. Then there was the U.P.S. shipping charge (there was too little time to use regular mail), which would be a minimum of \$10. I clicked on a seating chart and discovered that the seats were directly behind the basket, where I figured I would have a hard time seeing even a 7-foot-1-inch player like Shaquille O'Neal. I called the Spurs box office to see if there were any better seats available and was referred to the same area of seats.

Meanwhile, I started checking out the so-called secondary, or resale, market. Using a search engine, I found that there were several sites offering Spurs tickets, but most of them simply referred customers to a phone number. Tickets.com referred me to the Spurs home page. I sent e-mail queries to two sites: FrontRowUSA.com (frontrowusa.com) and Premium Tickets (premiumtix.com).

I received e-mail replies the next day, but the prices they offered seemed excessive. FrontRowUSA.com had tickets behind the basket, three rows up, for \$179 each, and Premium Tickets was also offering tickets behind the basket, higher up, for \$75 each. Decent midcourt tickets were \$325 to \$450 each. I checked out various auction sites without any luck. Returning to the Ticketmaster site, I found that the game tickets had already sold out, which left me at the mercy of the scalpers. I searched again and came up with a site called Ticket Dog, based in Austin, Tex., which features a beguiling animated bloodhound that promises to "hunt down the tickets you need for sports, concerts and theater events nationwide" (www.ticketsconcertssports.com). The N.B.A. request form let me choose from three price levels: top dog, hot dog and junkyard dog. I chose hot dog and clicked to send the form by e-mail.

Within a few hours I had a reply by e-mail offering a range of prices, all very high, but suggesting that I could call a toll-free number to ask about other available tickets. When I called, a broker named Courtney informed me that the market for the Spurs was up because they were doing so well, but she found a couple of seats that were better than the ones offered by Premium Tickets (behind the basket, of course, but within nonbinocular range) and were selling for less than \$100 each. The total, including shipping and tax, was \$206.80. I gasped but said yes. Within a couple of hours, I received a confirmation by fax. Two days later, the tickets arrived by Federal Express. I was happy until I saw that the



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face value of the tickets was \$24 each. The transaction, however, did not violate Texas law.

When we arrived in San Antonio in the pouring rain a few minutes before the game, we learned that there was another cost we had not counted on: parking. We were told by attendants that parking at the Alamodome was by permit only, so we wound up on a distant unofficial lot next to the railroad tracks. Our feet were soaked by the time we walked in the door, but fortunately, the seats were pretty good. And even better, the Spurs won in a blowout. (Later, when I spoke to Christopher Melick, the owner of Ticket Dog, he said the service often got complaints about tickets when a fan's team lost.)

I decided that Ticket Dog might be cute, but he will be doing his fetching for someone else for my next big event: a Bruce Springsteen concert. Even as I write this, my husband is wearing a wristband he acquired early yesterday morning from a local ticket vendor. The band merely allows him to stand in line to buy concert tickets -- wristband numbers are drawn at random, so he will have to get lucky. I plan to give the Web a try, but I also plan to work the phone, hitting the redial button with one hand and the connect button on my computer keyboard with the other.

Online Box Offices

There are many online ticket sites. Here are some of them.

TICKETMASTER: www.ticketmaster.com Sells tickets directly for a variety of live events, which are searchable by city or venue or by the categories of sports, music, arts and family. Payment is by credit card, and convenience, handling and delivery charges (the latter when the tickets are purchased less than two weeks in advance) are extra.

TICKETWEB: www.ticketweb.com Tickets can be purchased directly online by credit card. Affiliated with the groups and venues for which it sells tickets, the site adds a modest service charge to the cost of tickets.

CULTUREFINDER: www.culturefinder.com Allows you to search for cultural events by city and date and buy tickets for a modest service fee. Tickets are picked up at the box office.

TICKETS.COM: www.tickets.com Although its selection of sports, shows, concerts and other cultural events is not as extensive as Ticketmaster's, it includes links to other ticket sellers. It also includes an auction site. Fees are similar to Ticketmaster's.

MOVIEFONE: www.moviefone.com Allows you to select a theater, movie and specific show time for purchase, then pick up your tickets at the theater by swiping your credit card in the Automatic Ticketing Machine in the lobby. The surcharge (usually \$1.50 per ticket) is extra.

TIXX.COM: www.tixx.com A large reseller not affiliated with any venue or group. Surcharges can be substantial. Tickets for some events may be ordered online by credit card, but for others, you are directed to order by phone or e-mail.

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