From the SelectedWorks of Jack Styczynski

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Goin' back to New Orleans, part deus

Jack Styczynski
As the NCAA tournament took court in New Orleans this month, it was easy to forget the post-Katrina reality that still exists in town.

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Basketball Times Online

NEW ORLEANS — Is the Big Easy back?

Three years ago, I traveled to New Orleans to write a Basketball Times feature on the possible return of the Final Four after a long hiatus. It was my first time back after Hurricane Katrina, and even 18 months after the storm, it was a wake-up call. With much of the sports media in town to cover the NCAA Tournament sub-regionals, I spent the bulk of my week volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. I had the sore joints and fire ant bites to prove it.

Since then, I’ve returned several times to play my small part in the ongoing recovery effort, spending my Yankee cash liberally and continuing to stretch my cubicle-atrophied muscles at rebuilding sites. That included this month, corresponding with another set of tournament sub-regionals.

The good news is, we now know the Final Four will return in 2012, where it will join a recently minted Super Bowl trophy, not to mention the Super Bowl game itself and a women’s Final Four in 2013.

On the sporting front, things couldn’t be much better in New Orleans, so it seemed like a good time to revisit some of the same places and people I did in 2007, to get perspective on the city’s progress and the role sports are playing in it.

There was some disappointment, to be sure. I’ve been around town enough to know that the Big Easy is, in fact, not “back” to the way it was pre-Katrina. Yet there doesn’t seem the same urgency to get the message out anymore.

(Jack Styczynski volunteered this month with the Phoenix of New Orleans.)

John Calipari, who made sure to note he took his Memphis team on a tour of the devastation when he came three years ago, did not do likewise with his Kentucky squad this month. “I had them go down on Bourbon Street and go to the French Quarter, but we didn’t get on the bus and travel around the city, which I’ve done with all my other teams,” said Calipari, despite admitting he thought about it when the team plane landed.

The NCAA also did not publicize Habitat for Humanity’s rebuilding efforts this year, as it did in 2007 with logos on the court and a building demonstration outside the New Orleans Arena. “There’s still a lot of Habitat houses going up, but it’s not something the NCAA wanted to do this time around,” said Greater New Orleans Sports Foundation President Jay Cicero.

That’s not meant to slam Calipari or the NCAA. Calipari may as well work for the Convention & Visitors Bureau, for all the good things he says about New Orleans. And the NCAA has hardly abandoned the city, first keeping its commitment to hold men’s and women’s tournament games here in 2007 and 2008, and later adding more men’s action in 2010 and 2011, capped off with the aforementioned men’s and women’s Final Fours in 2012 and 2013.

“They felt like they were being part of the rebuilding of this area, a big part of it,” said Cicero.

But if the message is to get out about the city’s remaining needs, it’s evidently going to be up to us media folk. Veteran New Orleans Times-Picayune sports columnist Peter Finney, while noting the unprecedented euphoria in the wake of the Saints Super Bowl victory, pulled no punches. “There’s a lot to be done,” he said. “It’s been slow. I think it’s gonna pick up when there’s a change in administration with the mayor. I think that’s gonna help, but that’s a guess. There’s a long way to go. Some sections
of the city, they really need a lot of help. People still don't realize the damage."

Even Cicero echoed that sentiment.

"I think that some might feel like the city's 100 percent back when we're not," he said. "But I think these sporting events also lead to the opportunity to tell the world exactly where we are. Yes, our hospitality areas, the French Quarter, Superdome, arena, convention center are all back and able to produce a lot of economic impact and revenue for the city and state that can be used in the still devastated areas of our city. But it's important for everyone to understand that we're not done, and it's still a long way to get back to where we were as far as our neighborhoods are concerned. You can still take a drive into some devastated neighborhoods and go, 'Oh my God, how can it still be like that?""

Nonetheless, both Finney and Cicero agreed that sports has led the charge to what has been accomplished thus far, with the benefits outweighing any distractions.

"Sports drives tax dollars and publicity that you couldn't get with a convention or anything else," said Cicero.

The Super Bowl will be back.

The Final Four will be back.

And with a hammer, I'll be back.

It's not finished.

(Comment section)