

These exclusive tickets cost \$100 ... for an N.J. high school basketball game



Kentucky men's basketball coach John Calipari sits courtside last Wednesday at Brookdale Community College. (Andrew Mills | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

The laminated VIP badges were stacked neatly on a folding table like back-stage passes to a rock concert. Fans who had forked over an unheard of amount of cash filed into the arena, grabbed their exclusive tickets and draped them around their necks.

It typically costs a few bucks to watch a high school basketball game in New Jersey.

But not last Wednesday night. Courtside seats were \$100 a pop. VIP tickets ran \$35.

Read it again: \$100 to watch teenagers play basketball. It's among the most state officials say has ever been charged at a high school game.

The Jersey Shore Challenge at Brookdale Community College, presented by a local training outfit and media company, featured a pair of games headlined by [Ranney](#) vs. [Roselle Catholic](#), two national powers loaded with three McDonald's All-Americans between them.

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It was pegged as a partial fundraiser with a portion of the proceeds going to charity: an ALS Foundation and [Max Strong](#), which benefits the ailing son of Ranney coach Tahj Holden.

Despite the charitable tie, state officials and lawmakers called the price tag egregious and said some of the increasing number of showcase events popping up all over the state are exploiting high school athletes.

"These same private, for-profit individuals that prey on vulnerable parents in the offseason are now infiltrating high school sports," said Colleen Maguire, the director of finance and administration at the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association. "It's completely commercializing high school athletics and making a for-profit business."

Even by the new standards of big-time high school sports, where teenage superstars are fawned over by adoring adults and games are

plastered on national TV, last Wednesday's event pushed the limits. Forty banquet chairs aligned a sideline reserved with pieces of paper for the \$100 courtside seats. Above were 370 seats in the \$35 VIP section, blocked off by young ticket-takers. Together, just those 410 seats could rake in an estimated \$16,950.

Before long, the most famous college basketball coach on the planet — Kentucky's John Calipari — was seated at midcourt, near a young social media star named [Filayyy](#) who has 1.3 million Instagram followers. Kids, players and fans took turns hounding them for selfies. The game was streamed live, and dozens of people crowded the baseline with cameras raised, hoping to capture a massive dunk that might go viral.

General admission was \$15 for adults and \$8 for students. And even those prices are nearly three times more than the NJSIAA is allowed to charge for the very same matchups in the state playoffs.

Averaged out, ticket revenue alone for last Wednesday's games could have reached roughly \$35,000, and that's not factoring in potential sponsorship money. According to StubHub, some general admission tickets were even cheaper down the road at Rutgers and Seton Hall, where both teams were hosting conference games the same night.

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"It's a disgrace," said Assemblyman John Burzichelli (D-Gloucester),

whose 2009 ticket pricing legislation limited what the NJSIAA can charge for postseason events. "This continued evolution of high school athletics into business ventures is very concerning."

Burzichelli's controversial bill aimed to make high school sporting events more affordable for average families. At the same time, it drastically reduced the NJSIAA's postseason ticket revenue; the organization charged \$5 for adults and \$3 for students when Ranney and Roselle Catholic played in an epic playoff game last March.

Maguire said the ticket prices last Wednesday and at other events around the state go against the spirit of Burzichelli's law, which only affects postseason prices and was created at a time when the thought of a \$100 high school ticket would have seemed incomprehensible.

"The spirit of the statute is high school sports should be affordable for families and fans," Maguire said. "It shouldn't be in the business of trying to make money off of those families, parents and fans."

As for last Wednesday's showcase, Roselle Catholic coach Dave Boff, who helped organize the event, said some of the courtside seats came as part of a package for sponsors. He also emphasized the \$15 and \$8 option for general admission.

The \$100 seats "are mostly about giving the corporate sponsors something of value in return for their advertising dollars and sponsorship dollars toward the event," Boff said.

Boff and others associated with the showcase did not disclose how much money it generated or what portion went to charity.

"I think after all the bills are paid, I'm under the impression that all of it would end up at a charity," Boff said. "That's the way I understood it."

Either way, last Wednesday's showcase is one of dozens being played all over the state this season, and some of the other events appear to have no charitable element — period.

The five-game Boardwalk Showcase, run by Hoop Group, a private instruction and exposure company in Neptune, charged \$80 for courtside seats and \$40 for premium tickets for its Jan. 12 event. (Adults were charged \$15 and students \$7.) Online promotion for the showcase made no mention of charity.

The Metro Classic, coming later this week at Kean University, offers courtside seats, but only for event sponsors, according to Pryia Roy, the tournament director. Advance tickets purchased online are \$15 for adults, children and students, and Roy said a portion of the proceeds will go to charity, but he did not say how much.

Eric Kessler, Hoop Group's team tournament director, declined to disclose how much Hoop Group made from the Boardwalk Showcase, but said "we certainly are not doing this for money."

"It's just an opportunity that we offer fans, and they've taken advantage of it and have wanted to do it," he added.

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Several coaches said they're not happy with the rising ticket prices, but that there's little choice in taking part in the surging number of

showcase events.

"The bottom line is, I'm going to all those events and so are the other coaches because our kids get exposure," Red Bank Catholic girls coach Joe Montano said. "And in our mind, if we're not getting them exposure, we're not helping them. Those events are run for that."

Exposure certainly was at the forefront last Wednesday night when Ranney and Roselle Catholic took the floor. All the courtside and VIP seats were filled, and the 2,000-seat arena was so packed fans, parents and children stood shoulder-to-shoulder, three- and four-deep along the entire concourse, craning for a peak of the court.

Ranney, ranked No. 3 at the time in the NJ.com statewide top 20, went on to [knock off No. 1 Roselle Catholic](#), 61-49.

As high school sports continue to explode to levels never seen before, and fans remain eager to watch the latest batch of soon-to-be-stars, Burzichelli said there needs to be oversight. Especially when money is involved.

"The focus of high school sports," Burzichelli said, "is being blurred."

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