

Blue Jays become marketing gem for York Region businesses

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There's one certainty for local sports apparel stores when it comes to the Toronto Blue Jays right now: merchandise sales are red-hot.

At Pro Image, which is located in Upper Canada Mall in Newmarket, nearly half the store is decked out in Jays shirts, hats, bobbleheads and other paraphernalia. With the team in the midst of a second consecutive playoff run, fans want to wear the team's signature blue and white. In fact, in the brief time yorkregion.com was chatting with the store's cashier, Riley Grace, almost everyone who came through the door walked immediately to the Jays section.

They tried on baseball caps and sorted through t-shirts and sweatshirts. It's hardly an unusual practice these days, Grace said.

"The Jays have been the best seller lately, by far," he said, sporting a Jays cap and putting a white team jersey on a hanger Sunday afternoon.

The three most popular Jays for merchandise sales, in order, are third baseman and reigning American League MVP Josh Donaldson, centre fielder Kevin Pillar and pitcher Marcus Stroman, Grace said.

"Last year was definitely far bigger, in terms of excitement for it; this year's still



Chris Simon/Metroland

Chris Benson, owner of The Cove in Newmarket, says the success of the Toronto Blue Jays have had a positive effect on business at his restaurant.

been really good, but not as big," he said. "People expect them to be in there and the fan base is already built. Last year, it was 'I got to hop on the bandwagon; the Jays are winning and I have to get my gear', but if they make it to the next round and then to the World Series, I can see the excitement going way up."

National media reported on the sud-

den hike in Jays merchandise sales as the team sprinted to its first AL East division title in more than 20 years last summer, and while the Jays struggled a bit down the stretch of this year's regular season - they settled for a wild card berth after losing the division lead to the Boston Red Sox over the final month of this season - attendance reached over three million at

Rogers Centre.

Interest in the team has clearly been expressed through merchandise purchases at many local retailers and food and beverage sales at some restaurants, said Chris Benson, owner of The Cove in Newmarket.

"Last year, people really didn't come in for games because they expected them to win (late in the year)," he said, as a Los Angeles Dodgers and Washington Nationals playoff game appeared on television screens in the bar area. "Ninety-nine per cent of people in this town are Maples Leafs fans, so they're used to let-down. They don't expect much. People in here are more vocal and it's all positive. They've been ahead in every (playoff) game. It's been a positive experience."

Even The Cove's takeout service is climbing lately, Benson said.

"They make an event out of it," he said. "People have really done up their homes and they invite their buddies to come over and watch the game. For a big game like this, we notice an increase. People call in and take it home. It lingers too, because then people want to come in the next day and talk about the game."

The Jays face the Cleveland Indians in the American League Championship Series.

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