

CASH CAMP

Vikings close up a short training camp at MSU

Businesses happy there was any camp at all

By Robb Murray

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When the decision was finally made to hold a shortened version of Minnesota Vikings training camp in Mankato, and the team and grounds crew at Minnesota State University scrambled to get everything ready, the collective business community breathed a sigh of relief.

The team was coming, which meant fans were coming, which meant cash registers would be chinging and the general purple-fueled giddiness that grips the town would be back — even if it was for two weeks instead of three.

And now that all is said and done, local business owners and the Greater Mankato Convention and Visitors Bureau say the shortened camp, while probably not matching the attendance numbers of a full camp, exceeded expectations ... for the most part.

“ One of the things we missed the most was not having the outstate Vikings clubs,” said Jon Mueller, owner of Johnny B’s in at University Square Park. “ They’ve got, you know, 15 to 30 members, they plan vacations around camp and they come from San Francisco, Seattle, Texas. We missed them this year and that was the biggest things we noticed. But the crowd really did stand up and hold its own. It was great, and we feel very fortunate that the team came.”

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Photos by John Cross

Punter Chris Kluwe (front) and wide receiver Stephen Burton signed autographs for fans following a final Vikings training camp practice session Thursday at Minnesota State University.



Viking purple was the predominant color of a capacity lunch crowd at Johnny B's as Jon Robertson sliced up more roast beef Thursday, the final day of the Vikings preseason training camp at nearby Mankato State University.

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CAMP: Team was in town for 11 days

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The Vikings aren't releasing any attendance figures until today. But Anna Thill of the Greater Mankato CVB said all indicators she's seen are showing attendance was quite good.

"It was surprisingly better than we thought it may end up being," Thill said.

"It started off slow, but it got a lot of momentum."

Thill said she'll get the numbers from the Vikings soon and crunch them to see how the camp of 2011 stacks up against others.

With the shortened camp, it's unlikely this year's will match a typical year, where an estimated \$5 million is dumped into the local economy by out-of-towners via restaurant receipts and hotel bookings.

Thill conceded that some people simply chose not to come when the NFL lockout remained in effect earlier this summer and no one knew if there would even be a season. That kind of uncertainty tends to prompt families to make other plans or to forgo a weeklong trip that may be dependent upon making alternate plans for day care or pet boarding.

Still, any big event is good for business, no matter how long they're here.

Jay Reasner, operating partner at Pub 500, said his business definitely increases when training camp is in session. But whether it's training camp or RibFest or the Mankato Marathon, a well-run event is good for local businesses.

It's easy to tell, however, when the clientele is here for training camp.

"You see more purple, so you can see it's training camp," Reasner said.

If it left for good, however, Reasner says it wouldn't kill the restaurant. They'd lose the ambiance of excitement that a Vikings fansrich crowd can bring, but they'd survive.

"It wouldn't break us," he said.

But that notion is one the community has been pondering, perhaps even more in the past week as the team gets closer to having a bill considered at a possible special session of the Legislature to help them fund a new stadium.

There has been talk that, should the team get a new stadium, they'd have a state-of-the-art facility in which to hold training camp

and they wouldn't need three weeks in Mankato to get ready. Then, a Mankato tradition 46 years strong would end.

" We would have a different community if we lost camp," Thill said.

And the Greater Mankato CVB would need to work to fill the void.

They've already got some of that work done.

Last fall they commissioned a study to review the region's success in attracting tournaments and the community's assets including sports facilities and lodging. It also analyzed the region's potential for attracting new events and offered advice on which events to pursue for maximum economic impact.

Youth girls sports, for example, are a more desirable target because on average more family members come along to watch the games as opposed to boys sports. Girls sports attract an additional 3.1 visitors per athlete while boys attract .9.

It is likely, Thill said, that the Greater Mankato CVB would continue to focus on recruiting youth sports tournaments to town.

Until then, they're just hoping training camp sticks around for a long time, knowing they don't have much control over what happens.

" We're kind of in the back seat on that," Thill said.

Mueller's hopeful it won't leave.

" The people I've talked to say, new stadium or not, the team is still coming to Mankato," Mueller said.

"It's been a Mankato institution for 46 years. It gets rid of distractions; nothing is set up as nice as Mankato."