

# COLD HANDS, WARM EXPERIENCE

This year's NHL Winter Classic was a face-off between 1,800 Sodexo team members and a frigid winter storm. The team overcame the elements and many unique challenges to deliver a memorable fan experience for the big event.

By Jon Collier, General Manager, Sodexo, University of Michigan

The Sodexo staff at the University of Michigan is adept at managing large events, routinely improving the quality of life and overall experience for 110,000+ Wolverine football fans on game-day Saturdays at Michigan Stadium, the world's largest college football venue which is better known as "The Big House." However, hosting the National Hockey League's 2014 Bridgestone NHL Winter Classic, the world's premier outdoor hockey event held each New Year's Day, presented a whole new set of unique challenges for the team.

While the NHL was busy transforming The Big House from a football stadium into an ice hockey venue, the Sodexo staff prepared to welcome 105,000 new patrons, fans of both the Detroit Red Wings and Toronto Maple Leafs, including 45,000 fans from Canada.

## OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The first challenge the team faced was getting the venue properly branded for the big event. The NHL provided graphics to create new event signage for 252 menu boards that incorporated NHL Winter Classic branding, hockey themes, and corporate sponsors. Souvenir cups with NHL Winter Classic branding were also introduced to give the event a consistent theme and offer fans a memento to commemorate the day.

The next challenge was preparing for alcohol sales in the venue. Because The Big House is a college venue, alcoholic beverages are normally not served. The Sodexo team spent six months working with MillerCoors and other local vendors to ensure the necessary infrastructure and products were available and to obtain the proper licenses. More than 400 employees and non-profit group members were trained in responsible alcohol service. The team ordered 160,000 bottles of beer, set up bars, and modified 218 points-of-sale systems to ensure they were equipped and prepared to sell alcohol.

Sodexo also leveraged available resources in the area, borrowing equipment from nine other Sodexo-served locations, including the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania and Marshall University in West Virginia. Working with other Sodexo teams helped ensure that there was enough equipment to make the concessions operations run smoothly. For example, this collaborative effort helped ensure that there were enough Cambros available to store 3,500 gallons of hot chocolate – a necessity when you are keeping that many fans warm at an outdoor event.



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## A SUCCESSFUL SUITE EXPERIENCE

Meeting the needs of catering and suite guests presented another set of planning and execution challenges, like incorporating new sponsor products and providing storage for alcoholic beverages. The Sodexo team worked with the NHL to develop a new suite menu specific to the event that featured NHL Winter Classic branding and hockey-themed packages.

The NHL also helped Sodexo obtain contact information for all of the guests who had rented a suite. Most of those guests had never been to the venue prior to this event, so ongoing communication regarding menu options, timing, and general logistics for the day was a vital component for a successful suite experience.

In addition to managing the suites and concessions, Sodexo also executed three NHL Winter Classic parties. While Sodexo staff from nearby Adrian College hosted 350 at an up-

### QUICK HITS

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**Frozen Memories:** As the Wings and Leafs players battled on the frozen pond in The Big House, beer was freezing in cups and condiments in dispensers. But despite the frigid temperatures, the NHL and Sodexo delivered a memorable big-event experience.

scale party at the Jack Roth Club inside “The Big House,” the company also oversaw two offsite events. A 1,200-person party consisting of fans of both teams was set up in nearby Oosterbaan Fieldhouse and featured specialized lighting and decorations that added to the excitement of the upcoming game. And an elegant party for 600 NHL clients and corporate partners was also hosted in the adjacent Crisler Arena, Michigan’s basketball venue. At this party, guests enjoyed delectable menu selections featuring many Michigan-made products, including a popular Bloody Mary bar featuring fresh ingredients and products from the state.

Sodexo drew from its vast network of resources to ensure the success of the two functions. Employees from Sodexo’s operations at Bowling Green State University and the Columbus Crew Stadium, both in Ohio, augmented the local staff to ensure that guests experienced the finest service and hospitality.

An important tradition at the NHL Winter Classic is Spectator Plaza, an area featuring interactive displays, entertainment, and food. Sodexo managed every detail in the setup of Spectator Plaza in the parking lot next to The Big House, including everything from overseeing power, equipment, and products to creating a special barbecue smokehouse. More than 40,000 Wings and Leafs fans intermingled in Spectator Plaza throughout the event. With so much activity around them, no one even seemed to notice the snow falling and freezing temperatures.

## BATTLING THE ELEMENTS

The NHL Winter Classic is about two NHL teams battling it out in the elements, but this year’s edition also saw the Sodexo team facing off against the elements thanks to a brutal winter storm that sent temperatures plunging to the single digits while delivering some significant snow showers. Bundled up in NHL Winter Classic coats and hats to help ward off the frigid cold, more than 1,800 Sodexo employees and non-profit volunteers were ready to provide the fans with everything they needed to enjoy the game.

While spectators enjoyed a once-in-a-lifetime event, the Sodexo staff worked to ensure that the same wintry weather that made for perfect outdoor hockey conditions didn’t adversely affect the fan experience. Staff members routinely overcame obstacles like beer freezing in cups as it was poured and condiments freezing in dispensers. The effort was infectious and helped to create a real sense of camaraderie between fans and the staff. This spirit of teamwork manifested itself in unique ways, like fans helping staff members to push concessions carts through the heavy snow.

The 2014 Bridgestone NHL Winter Classic was a wonderful experience for fans and Sodexo employees alike, and one that they’re sure to remember for years to come. #

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