

On the Ball and Off the Wall: The bar exam

My guess is sports bars took it in the teeth with the COVID restrictions, but luckily most of the restraints on businesses were softened at a good time for sports bars. The NHL and NBA were just entering their postseason playoffs, the baseball season was getting rolling and soccer's Euro championship was kicking off. And international soccer is starting to take a foothold in the TV market, although you have to search out which places are airing the matches.

Which brings us to what constitutes a "sports bar." An array of giant TVs does not immediately qualify your pub as a sports bar. But a tavern with customers wearing their ball caps on backwards and highlighting the "prole strap" across their foreheads (you suss that description out), and/or replica jerseys of their favorite team, and screaming at the TV are defining features of a hardcore jock establishment. And when the NFL season rolls around, bonus points are awarded for getting as many different games on various TVs, easily identifiable by all the guys with Patriots, N.Y. Giants, N.Y. Jets and Pittsburgh Steelers jerseys parked in front of specific broadcasts. (Since Tom Brady arrived in Tampa Bay during the lockdowns, don't be surprised to see the Buccaneers have their own special set this fall.)

There are other telltale signs that this is where the diehard fans hang out: the photos on the walls. Snapshots of Bobby Orr flying through the air as he scored the game winner against the St. Louis Blues to win the Stanley Cup for the Boston Bruins is the equivalent of pictures of Jesus and President Kennedy on the walls of a strongly religious Catholic family, no shortage of which reside in Rhode Island.

Personal favorites of this writer are the Red Sox catcher and captain Jason Varitek giving the Yankees' A-hole Rodriguez a face wash with his catcher's mitt; any picture of Ted Williams; and the Celtics' Big Three of Larry Bird, Kevin McHale and Robert Parish walking down the court together. Other winners are the field at Fenway Park at night; boxer and local wild man Vinny Paz; PC hoops legends Jimmy Walker and Billy Donovan; and what the hell, PC coach Rick Pitino shouting from the sidelines.

There are other rules of the sports bar road, especially regarding drinks. Acceptable choices are shots, beer (lots of), or Captain and Cokes. Nothing too healthy, unless it is a Bloody Mary and you are trying to survive a heavy-duty hangover.

Finally, many down-and-dirty sports bars are not going to win any interior design awards. But part of the joy experienced by the customers is the smell of old beer, dark wooden walls and fellow travelers who you don't know but are still high-fiving when the hometown boys do something miraculous. So the slicker the joint looks, it's buyer beware. And know that when you start swearing like a sailor, and the crowd appears offended, you're probably in the wrong place.