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Best Seats in the House

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“HEY, boobie, talk to me,” the Ticket Man said.

A ticket to the Super Bowl.

The Ticket Man, whose name is Richard Ebers, was on the phone. He is always on the phone. The best way to speak to the Ticket Man is to call him, even if you’re standing next to him. His wife has trouble getting a word. Often, he is juggling three calls.

“Allman Brothers? What’s the date?”

“Robbie? Hi, boob. Tell me what you want.”

“Yeah, babe, what do you need?”

The Ticket Man's business is the resale of premium tickets to sporting events and concerts. By premium ticket, he means "the best in the house."

Mr. Ebers sells tickets to all the elite events: the World Series, Daytona 500, Triple Crown horse races, Grand Slam tennis tournaments, the four golf majors, the Olympics. He does rugby in England, the Cricket World Cup, the Westminster dog show, the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas. All the New York games and any out-of-town game a customer wants. Plays, operas, ballets, "American Idol." Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, Jay-Z. Among the more than 90,000 people attending the Super Bowl on Sunday in Arlington, Tex., 136 of them got their seats from Mr. Ebers, paying \$2,250 to \$9,500.

The Ticket Man counts 6,000 clients, 500 of whom are his core; a big-spending individual might buy 250 seats a year, a company 1,500. These are people who can afford the best in the house: heads of hedge funds and real estate companies, successful lawyers. Mr. Ebers sells to Goldman Sachs, Chase, Barclays, Morgan Stanley. Of the many maxims by which he operates, perhaps the most vital is one a longtime customer conveyed: "I never want my competitor sitting in front of me."

If a client asks, the Ticket Man will arrange hotel reservations, restaurant bookings, party invitations and celebrity meet-and-greets, whereby clients can duck backstage and shake hands with Lady Gaga for a nanosecond.

"If you paid me enough money," Mr. Ebers said, "I'd wait in line at the car wash for you."

The so-called secondary market where tickets are resold is a cluttered and controversial landscape. These days, most purchases unfold online, where customers click through diagrams of stadium layouts and deal with layers of hidden fees. Many consumers view it with derision. Its legality has been much contested, and its societal value is something that can keep academics talking for eons.

While they converse, the Ticket Man keeps selling, not online but on the phone. He figures he sold \$10 million last year. That's a blip in a sprawling multibillion-dollar industry, but Mr. Ebers thinks he may sell more premium seats than any other person in New York. When the economy roared in the late 1990s, he said, he eclipsed \$20 million a year in sales. He said he would never obtain tickets illegally, though he acknowledged he didn't know how some of his suppliers built their inventory.

"I sell pieces of cardboard," he said, summarizing his existence. "I'm obnoxious enough to think that once people see me, they love me," he added, unblushingly. "My friends kiss me on my lips because they love me."

The Ticket Man considers himself to be "electrifying."

"I send out an electrifying vibe," he said. He stuck out his arm. "You can touch me, though, and you won't get shocked."

Mr. Ebers is a stout, animated man of 59 whose hair has long retreated to the balcony, and who struggled with his weight for decades, until gastric bypass surgery in May. He has a point-blank gaze and seems to be in motion even when he's not. He's up around 4 a.m. and often asleep by 8:30 p.m. Since every chirp could mean a sale, he sleeps with his BlackBerry parked on his chest, set to vibrate in deference to his wife, Harriet Ebers, who still objects.

The Ticket Man attends about 20 events a year, far fewer than when he started selling tickets 24 years ago, and he is always checking to see where clients are sitting and whether they look happy. Crowds rattle him, so he rarely stays until the end of events: at concerts, he gets the playlist in advance and heads home with several songs left. If you ask him if he's a big sports fan or a Broadway buff, his answer is always the same: "No, I'm a ticket fan. I'm the biggest ticket fan in the world."

THE phone rang, rang, rang, rang.

Mr. Ebers works out of the echoing offices of Inside Sports and Entertainment, a ticket and event agency on East 33rd Street with a staff of 20. He is chief sales officer. He said he earned in the high six figures — or low seven — a year.

He sits at the head of the ticket equivalent of a commodities trading desk, flanked by jabbering young men and women. The business boils down to risk arbitrage, scooping up tickets that one hopes to sell for more than what was paid.

On this day, the hot ticket was the next night's Knicks-Heat game. LeBron James would be making his first appearance in New York since spurning it for Miami. A broker had two great seats, face value \$240. Did Mr. Ebers want them for \$1,500 each? He snapped them up and sold them four hours before tipoff to an advertising executive for \$1,750 apiece.

A real estate guy wanted four tickets for a Linkin Park concert. Mr. Ebers had never heard of Linkin Park. He bought the tickets for \$650 each, sold them for \$775, with backstage access.

Then Lady Gaga tickets.

Then Spider-Man.

Then the Rangers.

Another broker offered him two Knicks seats at \$6,000 each. Mr. Ebers hiked his eyebrows and said he would see if he had a customer. After he hung up, he said: "I'm not even going to call anybody. It's an obnoxious price."

Mr. Ebers assembles much of his sports inventory from season-ticket holders with whom he has relationships or from other brokers. Concert tickets usually arrive from wholesalers or sponsors, and with them, Inside Sports may do swaps: Masters badges, say, for Taylor Swift tickets. He

relies on Web sites like TicketNetwork and EventInventory, which consolidate the offerings of brokers across the country. He likes to sell for a little less than what someone could find online.

Even on vacation, the Ticket Man sells. He was in St. Maarten recently and sent an e-mail: “Just sold 2 tix behind magic bench to ceo of internet payment processing company for Orlando tonight.”

Mrs. Ebers must have loved that.

Secondary-ticket sales is business long scarred by dishonorable behavior: resellers gouging customers with delusional prices, spurious tickets being hawked by scalpers outside stadiums, brokers gobbling up prime seats with software programs known as “bots,” insiders illegally slipping tickets to brokers in return for bribes known as “ice.”

Many consumers hate brokers and are convinced that they lock up the good seats, though the Internet has certainly made access easier and prices more transparent.

Innumerable Web sites, led by the giant StubHub — which is owned by eBay — ply the market: Razorgator, Vividseats, GreatSeats. The demarcation between primary and secondary sellers can blur. Ticketmaster, the king of primary ticket sales, owns TicketsNow, the second-biggest reseller.

In this splintered world, a doorknob salesman in Utica, N.Y., who lays his hands on front-row seats to a World Series game and wants to flip them on StubHub becomes a competitor to Richie Ebers.

New York State has regulated the business of ticket reselling since the 1920s, requiring brokers to be licensed and to keep records of purchases and sales. Until 2007, the government imposed caps on resale prices. They were widely flouted anyway, including by Mr. Ebers.

“You broke the law every day,” he said.

A report on ticket reselling released last year by the New York Department of State, which handles the licensing of brokers, concluded that price caps never had much effect. It found that illegal acquisition of tickets through “ice” and other means remained a problem, but did not suggest the government was doing much to stop it.

A spokesman for the department said 51 resellers currently held licenses; Mr. Ebers and others said they believed many more operated without them. In fact, Inside Sports, Mr. Ebers’s company, has not had a license for the past two years, though its president said it was applying for one again.

Mr. Ebers said he usually charged 10 percent to 25 percent above what he paid for tickets; it could be 100 percent for seats having unappeasable demand. The original ticket holder, he said, often pockets the fattest profit. Prices for sporting events have dropped probably 20 percent to 30

percent over the past five years, he estimated, because of intense Internet competition and the weak economy.

The Ticket Man isn't a Big Thought person. He does not dwell on the socioeconomic fallout from his work. He sees a need among his high-octane clientele for someone to get them into places where they want to be, and he's happy to oblige.

Once in a while, perhaps 5 percent of the time, he loses money: he bought too high, or he needed to please a customer.

Years ago, a cherished client had to attend that night's showing of "Phantom of the Opera." Superior seats were gone. Mr. Ebers sped to the theater, buttonholed someone content to take hundreds of dollars more than the seats cost, then passed them on to his client at a loss.

BORN in Brooklyn, his father was an accountant and his mother a homemaker. He has a sister.

He went to St. John's University but left in his second semester to join the Navy, then completed college through correspondence at Old Dominion University, earning a degree in meteorology.

Weather work failed to materialize. Mr. Ebers took a telemarketing position at a company that sold floor wax, light bulbs and other maintenance products. He developed a rapturous relationship with the telephone. It made him something he wasn't. What he was, for most of his life, was fat — at one point weighing 330 pounds. (His high school nickname was "Fats.") But the other person on the phone didn't know his dimensions. This emboldened him. He found he had a knack for making people buy.

Mr. Ebers sold so much that he acquired significant equity in the company. Then he grew weary of maintenance products.

One of his duties at the company was to buy tickets as rewards for the week's top seller. Tickets enthralled him: they were the doorways to amazing experiences.

So, in 1987, he became a broker. At first, he would sell anything to anyone. "I would have sold your tickets to your kid's high school play," he said.

Steadily, Mr. Ebers focused on the high-end market, where it was possible to sell more to fewer customers. For the 1991 Super Bowl (Giants vs. Bills, in Tampa), he sold 100 tickets to Boeing, which the company distributed to its big customers. Half of the tickets were for seats on one side of the field, half for the other. Boeing officials wanted it that way, he said, so that if a bomb exploded, it would not decimate airplane sales.

That same year, Mr. Ebers bought a commanding number of tickets to "Miss Saigon," which became a sizzling Broadway show.

The Ticket Man has worked independently and as a partner in other agencies, but joined Inside Sports in November. Working at an agency has allowed him to draw on more inventory and to

face less risk. One of his aspirations is to sell and create more “experiences” extending beyond the pieces of cardboard that have been his lifeblood. Inside Sports, for instance, can arrange to get a pro hockey player to teach how to take a slap shot.

“Like maybe I could get you to sing the national anthem before a game,” Mr. Ebers said. “I haven’t done it. I think it’s possible.”

THE Ticket Man was having drinks with Stephen Siegel, chairman of global brokerage at CB Richard Ellis, a large commercial real estate firm. He’s an old friend and a big customer.

Sipping his martini, Mr. Siegel mentioned he had not renewed his Yankees season tickets; Mr. Ebers said he would get him whatever he needed. They talked about the Mets, tennis.

“I love this man,” Mr. Siegel said. “He’s Mr. Yes instead of Mr. No. Anything I need, he gets.”

Once, while he was out of town and his housekeeper needed cash to pay someone, Mr. Siegel called Mr. Ebers, who went over at 3 a.m. to drop off the money. StubHub can’t pay your nanny.

Most ticket men are disembodied voices on the phone. Not Mr. Ebers. Three or four nights a week, he’s out with clients, taking them to dinner, playing poker. He has cultivated relationships with high-demand restaurants and gets tables for clients when they can’t — gratis.

Now, drinks at the New York Palace with David Robin, senior vice president at Newedge, a brokerage house. Mr. Robin wanted the U.S. Open tennis as usual, and he might want to take his children to Wimbledon. And, of course, don’t forget the Allman Brothers. Mr. Robin wanted to go three times. Mr. Ebers had him covered.

Mr. Robin articulated why he relied on Mr. Ebers: “I don’t want to use a machine, because I’ve got 8,000 other things to do.”

To keep visible, Mr. Ebers also donates tickets to charity events, which he attends, and goes to industry banquets.

His son, Jake, who is planning to go to law school, was born with a club foot corrected by the work of the New York University Hospital for Joint Diseases. Because of Mr. Ebers’s contributions and fund-raising, the hospital now has the Ebers Center for Foot Deformity.

HE unlocked the door, said, “Hi” to his wife. His BlackBerry squealed furiously.

The Ticket Man lives in a two-bedroom apartment on the Upper East Side. Sports memorabilia bought mainly at charity auctions festoon his son’s room: a seat back from Yankee Stadium signed by Derek Jeter, a third base signed by Wade Boggs, a \$450 check made out to a bakery from Wayne Gretzky that Mr. Ebers found in the lobby of his old building.

The acquisitions were for Jake. Mr. Ebers has no hobbies of his own. “People should have a hobby,” Mrs. Ebers said. “This one does not have one except being on the phone.”

“I know, I know,” Mr. Ebers said.

She said, “My friends always say all the pictures from vacations are Richie on the phone.”

He is not star-struck. He does not see great worth in shuffling down a line of oglers to simply pump Justin Bieber’s hand or to ask Shakira how’s it going, especially at what could be \$1,500 a pop.

Is there anyone he would like to meet and greet?

“I’d like to meet Eric Clapton and sit and watch him play a guitar,” Mr. Ebers said. “I’d like to sit in a room with Barbra Streisand.”

Mrs. Ebers began to say something. Then the phone rang.