Corporate Canada ready for fun and Games

By **Andrew Willis and Andy Hoffman**, The Globe and Mail Posted Friday, February 12, 2010 8:22 PM ET

VANCOUVER - Jordan Bitove and Barenaked Ladies drummer Tyler Stewart are trying to rhyme off all the acts that will play at Molson Canadian Hockey House over the course of the Vancouver Games, only to be interrupted, repeatedly, by Mr. Bitove's BlackBerry.

The curtain went up last night on what promises to be corporate schmooze central at the Olympics. Mr. Bitove's soccer field-sized circus tent is the hot ticket for waves of Canadian executives rolling into the Games.

"It suddenly sunk in that this is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and the corporate world just has to be here," said Mr. Bitove, founder of event planning company Vision Co.

Recession-driven belt tightening that curtailed spending on Olympic packages last year is being revisited by corporate Canada. From bankers to phone company bosses to CEOs of consumer product companies, executives are heading for Vancouver.

The last-minute interest means Hockey House will be rocking, as up to 3,000 people each night listen to acts such as the Barenaked Ladies and rub elbows with NHL legends. Molson has set aside 350,000 cans of beer for thirsty revellers.

A few VIP packages were still available Friday, but Hockey House's $99 general admission tickets are sold out for every evening save Valentine's, and events such as the $995 gold medal hockey game package are all gone. Hence the direct appeals to Mr. Bitove's BlackBerry.

Bell Canada chief George Cope can also expect to field calls from ticket-seeking friends. The telecom company is feting clients with the likes of singer Sarah McLachlan, a Vancouver resident, in private parties at Players Chop House, a high-end eatery in the shadow of the main Olympic venues.

At accounting firm Deloitte, a major sponsor, the plan is to host up to 20 CEOs at a time, for up to three days each, with the executives staying in the luxurious Shangri-La Hotel. Vincor International Inc., the domestic arm of global vintner Constellation Brands, has venerable Napa Valley winery co-founder Margrit Mondavi hosting an event.

Royal Bank of Canada CEO Gordon Nixon will be hosting a cocktail party for clients, and Vancouver-based investment bank Canaccord Financial has at least one corporate hospitality suite booked for all the hockey games, as does Goldcorp Inc., which is hosting out-of town mining types and some employees from its global operations.

Official games sponsor Teck Resources Ltd. plans a huge bash on the top floor of its ocean-side offices for the first Canadian athlete to win gold on home soil. Teck, however, didn't pony up the cash for a corporate box to the hockey games. The decision to buy the seats had to be made last year as the miner was trying to pay down the crushing $10-billion debt load it took on to buy Fording Coal amid the market crash.

It's not only domestic companies stepping up for the 2010 Games: General Electric's entire board of directors, led by CEO Jeff Immelt, is making a long-planned trip to Vancouver for the first weekend of the games, after first stopping off in Alberta's oil sands to do some business.

Late Thursday, GE executives could be found in the bar of the swank new Fairmont Pacific Rim Hotel, with members of the band Blue Rodeo sitting at the next table. GE is expected to make major announcements on wind power and medical technology in Vancouver over the next week.

More than one corporate heavyweight couldn't wait to start the party. Hudson's Bay Co. chiefs Jeffrey Sherman and Bonnie Brooks opened a retreat for the families of Olympic athletes the night before the Games, with a bash that drew Liberal Party Leader Michael Ignatieff, Vancouver's political crowd, and an unscripted rendition of *O Canada* from the Canadian Tenors.

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