

Fans, players give TD Place at Lansdowne a loud welcome

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Thousands of Ottawa Redblacks season-ticket holders got their first look at the team's sparkling new home Wednesday night at the grand opening of TD Place at Lansdowne.

While the event was a chance for fans to tour the stadium and meet Redblacks players, it also served as a test run for team officials madly preparing for the team's July 18 home opener.

Some season-ticket holders took public transportation, as the city had hoped, and while the Glebe was noticeably busy, traffic was still moving. Others took shuttles leaving from various park-and-ride locations throughout the city.

Many fans donned new Redblacks gear, but there was also plenty of nostalgia in the air.

Mike Morris has been an Ottawa football fan for 60 years. The 82-year-old said he remembers the days when fans would park cars and beam the lights onto the field when games pushed into the evening, especially in hard-fought overtime.

On Wednesday, he stood facing centre field from the end zone, the white "R" of his new team's logo emblazoned on his chest.

"This is amazing," he said, gesturing to the new stadium. Morris bought season tickets with his son, who shares the same name.

Morris the younger said the influx of season ticket holders Wednesday — organizers were hoping for 10,000 attendees — was proof the Redblacks have support from the city.

Wednesday night featured player introductions for the Redblacks and the North American Soccer League's Ottawa Fury, after which fans were allowed onto the field for photos and autographs with the Redblacks.

Redblacks player Carlton Mitchell had some fun with his introduction, filming the crowd with his cellphone as he ran on to the field and taking selfies with his teammates.

“It’s a true blessing, coming here and being a part of history in this amazing city. Everyone’s welcoming us with open arms,” he said. “The 18th is going to be something magical.”

Redblacks president and Ottawa Sports and Entertainment Group partner Jeff Hunt spent the evening patrolling the stadium, greeting the fans. Countless people yelled thanks and congratulations at him, and universally praised their experience on the shuttles.

“When people are making a point to tell you the shuttles went well, that’s pretty gratifying,” Hunt said. “You can do all the planning and you can think you’re ready, but until you have people in ... you don’t know.”

Hunt said it was a “little bit overwhelming” to have so many people in the stadium for the first time, but he was pleased with the event. “It couldn’t have gone better.”

For fans, the glistening new stadium brought back some old traditions, namely, the north versus south side rivalry.

In the heart of the south side, Denis Charbonneau stood with friend Andre Laflamme, each sporting a Redblacks T-shirt and a ball cap. Charbonneau said they had already started up the age-old chants.

Turning across the field, he shouted: “North side sucks!”

“It’s a football city,” said Charbonneau, who also had season tickets in the Rough Rider days. The local owners will make the difference he added, pointing to the \$4.50 beers as a sign of a good start from management.

“It should be loud,” said Laflamme of the home opener at Lansdowne Park. Having seats, rather than benches, was a real step up from the old stadium, he added. “It’s all worth it. Look at this place, it’s gorgeous.”

The Redblacks play their first-ever home game on July 18 at 7 p.m. against the Toronto Argonauts. The game is sold out.

Before season-ticket holders were let in the building, there was a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by Mayor Jim Watson, his predecessor Larry O’Brien, OSEG Chairman Roger Greenberg and other dignitaries. Most city councillors also attended.