

Bucs fans win in ticket settlement

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Season ticket holders unhappy with their seats will get to pick new ones closer to the 50-yard line thanks to a plan to end a lawsuit.

Four longtime Bucs fans who sued the team over their seating assignments at Raymond James Stadium may now get their pick of some of the best seats in the house.

Their attorney, Jonathan Alpert, announced in court Wednesday that both sides had reached an amicable settlement after more than 13 hours of court-ordered negotiation that ended around 3 a.m.

If approved, the settlement will end an extraordinary case involving a sports team suing its fans, criminal battery and extortion complaints, and one lawyer accusing another of tossing coffee in his face.

In a somewhat complex arrangement, the Bucs have agreed to make available 120 seats to season ticket holders unhappy with their seats. About one-third of those seats will be in choice sections near the 50-yard line, and the four fans named in the lawsuit will have first pick.

Also, each of the fans named in the class-action suit will be given a \$5,000 credit that can be used to pay off tickets or parking in the years to come.

The Bucs also agreed to drop the \$1-million defamation suits they filed against three of the fans who complained publicly about the Bucs and their seats after the team moved from Houlihan's Stadium to the newer, smaller stadium in 1998.

The Bucs also agreed to pay \$180,000 in attorneys fees and \$30,000 in costs.

Both sides agreed to drop pending criminal battery and extortion complaints alleging that one lawyer threw coffee in another lawyer's face, and that the Bucs threatened to revoke the four fans' season tickets.

Wednesday's agreement forbade the usually gregarious Alpert from commenting further on the settlement, which must be approved by Circuit Judge Sam Pendino.

"Instead of a lengthy dispute, we were able to amicably resolve our differences," Alpert said in a joint statement issued by the Bucs on Wednesday. "Both sides are satisfied with the results. My clients and I look forward to cheering the Buccaneers for many years."

Patsy Falcone, a fan for 15 years who found himself moved from the 50-yard line in the old stadium to the 10-yard line in Raymond James, said he too could not discuss the case.

"I'm not going to elaborate on anything," he said.

Bucs lawyer Arnold Levine said, "everybody gave. Everybody made certain adjustments they felt were appropriate to put the matter behind them."

Even though the stadium is "essentially sold out," no ticket holder will be involuntarily moved from a seat, Alpert said in court. According to documents filed Wednesday, the process is expected to work like this:

The Bucs will make available 120 seats, most in upper sections of the stadium. The four fans who sued, who hold 11 tickets among them, will have first choice. They presumably will pick from 32 seats in two sections on the 50-yard line on either side of the stadium.

The remainder of the 120 seats will be available to interested season ticket holders through a random selection process supervised by a court-appointed hearing master. Those fans must be willing to give up their current seats and are only eligible for available seats in the same price category. Season ticket holders are expected to be mailed a letter from the Bucs detailing the arrangement.

The lawsuit, filed one year ago, alleged that instead of using the stated criteria for seat assignments - such as how long someone was a ticket holder and where he sat at the old stadium - the Bucs used "other and secret" factors that may have benefited VIPs and elected officials.

At a previous court-ordered settlement hearing, Levine said Alpert flung a cup of lukewarm coffee in his face and stormed out. Alpert later countered that Levine had threatened that the fans could count on watching the games from their living rooms if they didn't agree to settle that day.

At a recent court hearing, Judge Pendino ordered the lawyers to "cut it out."

Settlement talks began at 1 p.m. Tuesday and stretched past midnight. Those attending nibbled on cookies and kept working even when the air conditioner cut out. Two sons of team owner Malcolm Glazer attended, one in person and one by telephone from California.

The four fans were there, too, though one of them eventually had to leave to get ready for work Wednesday morning.

- Staff writer Roger Mills contributed to this report.

Here's the deal

The fans who sued get their pick of some choice seats at Raymond James Stadium.

Other season-ticket holders can vie for about 100 other seats in different parts of the stadium.

The Bucs pay all legal fees and drop defamation lawsuits against the fans.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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