

# C-Webb takes a shot

## Experts ask how far celebrity power can go in a difficult business.

By Jon Ortiz - Bee Staff Writer

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Chris Webber's old Sacramento Kings jersey is put on display by Russ Conley and Ed Keegan at Center Court with C-Webb, Webber's restaurant that opened Tuesday night in Natomas. Sacramento Bee/Carl Costas

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Envision T.G.I. Friday's blended with the Basketball Hall of Fame and you're close to the concept behind Center Court with C-Webb, the new restaurant that former Sacramento King Chris Webber opened Tuesday night with an invitation-only party.

Strategically located about a mile from Arco Arena near Interstate 80 and Truxel Road, Center Court propels the 6-foot-10-inch Philadelphia 76ers power forward into the fraternity of sports figures who have jumped into -- and often out of -- the notoriously difficult restaurant business.

It also poses a test for Webber's partner, Dudum Sports and Entertainment of Walnut Creek: Will a basketball-themed restaurant in Sacramento work long term, given the Kings' uncertain future in the city?

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"A lot of these restaurants come and go," said H.G. Parsa, a professor of hospitality management at Ohio State University. "The celebrity's name may pull people in, but ultimately it's the food and the service that will bring customers back -- or keep them away."

Celebrities who get into the restaurant business usually put little more than their name on the line, Parsa said, and investors do the rest. Neither Webber nor Dudum representatives would disclose how much the project cost or how much either side has invested.

Standing in his restaurant crowded with more than 200 invited guests Tuesday night, Webber, who still owns property in Granite Bay, said he will drop by whenever the 76ers are in town.

"I'll be coming in, but not only me," said Webber, whose team plays tonight in Seattle. "I put calls out to my NBA friends and we'll take special care of them when they come in."

Americans will spend an estimated \$511.1 billion on restaurant food and drink this year, up from \$308.2 billion in 1996, according to the National Restaurant Association in Washington, D.C. Still, about six in 10 restaurants fail within the first three years. It's a labor-intensive business that deals with perishable food, high employee turnover and profit margins that average about 10 percent. Beyond that is the competition: Center Court with C-Webb will compete with at least 16 nearby restaurants.

In Dudum Sports, Webber has a partner with a history of developing successful celebrity- and sports-themed businesses, including the popular McCovey's Restaurant and Bing Crosby's Restaurant and Lounge, both in Walnut Creek.

Company founder Jeff Dudum decided to come into Sacramento with Webber, even though he hasn't played here in nearly two years, and despite concerns in some quarters that the Kings might leave town for a new arena.

"There's no baseball diamond near McCovey's, but we get people coming from Santa Rosa to Santa Cruz," said Dudum Sports' operations director Mark Woolridge during the Center Court's trial run on Monday. "It'll be the same here."

The restaurant also will test whether Webber, whose career with the 76ers appears to be in decline, still has cachet in the city where he had his greatest on-court success. The 14-year veteran and five-time All-Star, once one of the top players in the league, has been playing fewer minutes lately, particularly in the fourth quarter.

"Studies have shown that a celebrity's name can pull in about 30 percent of customers that come to a celebrity's restaurant," Parsa said. "Will that be the case here? We'll see."

And name alone isn't enough. Buffalo Bills quarterback Jim Kelly's diner and night club combo took a knee after two years. In Sacramento, former King Vlade Divac has opened two restaurants -- a French bistro in the Pavilions shopping center, L'Image, and Tunel 21 in Old Sacramento, which has cut its hours. An online review of the former NBA player's hot spot said, "Potential celebrity hangout has all the elements for a young, hip bar -- now it just needs the stars."

Webber and Dudum Sports say that they don't need the NBA in town to be successful. They have plans to expand the Center Court franchise into 10 cities, including non-NBA cities such as Tempe, Ariz., and Austin, Texas. Webber will scout present or past players to match with the Center Court brand in each location.

Still, Webber was adamant Tuesday that he believes Sacramento needs the Kings.

"You can't say Sacramento and not think of the Kings," he said. "If the team were to leave, I'll be one of the first to call for a new team to come in."

Webber wasn't ready to discuss the impact on his business should the Kings leave.

"I hope I wouldn't have to find out," he said.

That's because it's clear that part of Center Court's strategy is to lure customers with the chance to see stars. The restaurant will open from "11:30 in the morning until whatever on game nights," Woolridge said. "The after-game crowd tends to want to stay a little later, so we'll be flexible."

There's also a private room, a sort of restaurant luxury suite, where VIPs can gather with their friends and entourages. "We'll be the place to see and be seen," Woolridge said.

And watch a game. The 8,000-square-foot Center Court has 40 high-definition TVs, including five in a wind-screened patio area, one in each bathroom and five Jumbotron displays in a scoreboard that hangs over the restaurant's sunken hardwood basketball court/family dining area.

Booths ring the court, each with an artistically lighted and plexiglass-framed jersey from one of Webber's favorite players - Charles Barkley, Kobe Bryant, Jason Kidd and others -- hanging above it.

A horseshoe-shaped black granite counter centers the bar area, which is distinctly separate from the dining area, a concession the designers made to keep the restaurant family friendly, Woolridge said.

Near the entrance, 10 framed magazine covers chronicle Webber's career in Sacramento, including the 2001 issue of Sports Illustrated that proclaimed the Kings "The Greatest Show on Court."

The menu includes hamburgers, steaks, fish, salads, pizzas and the like. Woolridge said the average ticket price will run about \$17 per person, putting Center Court in roughly the same price category as nearby competitors like BJ's Restaurant & Brewhouse and Chili's.

Visitors entering the restaurant can gaze up into an atrium ringed with inspirational quotes from NBA greats. One by Michael Jordan seems particularly apt for the restaurant industry: "I have failed over and over in my life and that is why I succeed."

Jordan's restaurants in Chicago are doing fine.

## About the writer:

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Camilo Feliz, left, and Arturo Martinez apply finishing touches. Sacramento Bee/Carl Costas