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AN EXCERPT FROM

20th New Year's Ball Drop has extra spark

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Author: Tom Buckham - NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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The first New Year's Eve ball drop from the Electric Tower was staged in 1988 to celebrate 97 Rock's return to the airwaves three years after the station vanished from the FM dial. An estimated 15,000 people showed up in frigid Roosevelt Square for the midnight madness.

With the 20th drop approaching, sponsors say the event has grown into the second largest of its type in the country, with about 40,000 folks cramming into the triangular downtown park each Dec. 31 to watch the descent of a computer-guided, 1,000-bulb plexiglass ball.

To celebrate the anniversary and tout the New Year's Day hockey game between the Buffalo Sabres and Pittsburgh Penguins in Ralph Wilson Stadium, some frills have been added, organizers said Thursday. Players from the 1988 Sabres team -- including Grant Ledyard, who was on hand for a news conference in City Hall -- are expected to appear, and messages from the current squad will be beamed from two Jumbotron screens flanking the Frey Electric stage.

Organizers expect a record crowd, including people visiting town for the game that has been dubbed the Ice Bowl. The event will begin at 10:30 p.m. with 97 Rock personalities Larry Norton, who presided at the original drop, and Dave "DJ Jickster" Gick providing music and banter. A video featuring highlights from previous events will play on the Jumbotrons. It was produced by WKBW-TV, which has co-sponsored every ball drop.

The Buffalo drop will coincide with the famous countdown in New York City's Time Square. A 12-minute fireworks display choreographed to classic rock songs will follow. There will be several detonation locations, including five on the Electric Tower and one off-site.

Independent Health will be the major presenter. The drop will book-end the insurer's First Night Buffalo 5 to 10 p.m. family celebration in Buffalo Convention Center.

Other primary sponsors are Citadel Broadcasting, owner of 97 Rock; Police Athletic League; and Iskalo Development Corp., which owns the 95-year-old office tower.

Additional sponsors include Russell Salvatore, Frey Electric Construction, Noco Energy, Verizon Wireless, Mighty Taco, Time Warner and Hyatt Regency Buffalo.



Photo courtesy of Joe Cascio