

PICTURE PERFECT

The Offside bar in north London draws crowds from across the capital. Manager Richard Kay tells *Preview* how live sport, fast bar service and a gallery of classic sports images have kept the bar one step ahead of its many competitors

It may be stating the obvious, but London is big, so when your bar lies in the north of the city but still enjoys the custom of sports fans who travel from the far-flung reaches of the metropolis, you know you're doing a great job. Richard Kay, manager at the Offside bar, is among the few to have achieved such worthy recognition.

Offside is situated in a busy traffic thoroughfare in an unprepossessing part of Islington, certainly not an ideal spot to attract passing custom. And yet many London football fans are familiar with the bar and associate it with great nights for club and country.

One of the reasons for its first-rate reputation is the outstanding sports photography that adorns the bar's walls. It comes courtesy of part-owner, sports photographer Mark Leech, whose agency is based in the same building.

The pictures are fantastic and unique selling-points that raise the profile of the venue. Each month, a gallery is changed to fit in with major events and tournaments, capturing some of the best moments in sporting history.

'When the bar was set up, it was decided there wouldn't be the standard memorabilia, with signed merchandise like you get in the big sports bars,' says Richard. 'We feel the photography gives an individual feel to the bar. Because it's of such high quality, it doesn't alienate anyone – even non-sports fans can come in and enjoy it.'

'It's also a great asset for the staff. Most people will get up after ordering food and have a look around the bar so

when you bring them the meal, they often think it arrived quickly. Invariably it hasn't been prepared any more quickly than it normally would have been.'

The photography also attracts the interest of television broadcasters, Sky used the bar as the backdrop for its coverage of the 2006 World Cup football draw in December.

But the photos are only one aspect of Offside's appeal. Equally important is the commitment to showing live football and the outstanding service Richard and his staff consistently offer.

'So many bars show live football now that you have to offer something great,' says Richard. 'The fact is, customers don't always remember the good things about service, decent beer or the quality of the screens. They remember only the one bad thing you might have done. My staff and I know everything has to be done properly, even to the point of greeting customers when they first come to the bar. If you get anything wrong, then the customer will only ever pass that one thing on. They instantly forget the nine positive things. So that's what we do – we get everything right.'

What's particularly staggering about the ongoing success of Offside is that it's such a small bar. With a capacity of only 180, the profits are still considerable. Richard can make up to £3,500 during the four-hour window of a high-profile fixture, thanks to the loyalty he has earned. >





Adorning the walls of the Offside bar are several examples of outstanding sports photography, including this classic image of the Tour de France

‘Even a low-key fixture on an otherwise very quiet Monday night can bring in good business because we have customers who know that we’re guaranteed to show football.’

‘We’ll do our best to show any game live on Sky with full sound. So many people come here and say they’ve been in another bar and been told they can’t have the sound on. I don’t agree with showing a game in silence – we have the product and we want to make the most out of it.’

Being a small, crowded bar means a good view of the screens is a must. To this end, there are four high-quality plasma screens strategically placed around the venue and two large pull-down screens. Any customer in the pub just has to turn 10 degrees and they can get a good view.

This also works well for Richard, who is a keen football fan himself. Hailing from Manchester, his family have seven season tickets at Old Trafford. While he loves a live game, the atmosphere in the bar when his team are on the television is the perfect alternative to being there.

‘We’re in North London so we show Arsenal games as a priority. We know our customer base, and this is what the vast majority want. If we were somewhere else, it might be different.’

‘The only time it caused concern was in the Champions League group phase, mainly because I’m a Manchester United fan and some of the games clashed. But when Arsenal had qualified and were playing the meaningless Ajax game, we had Gooners in here asking to stick on the United v

Benfica game. They wanted to cheer on the Portuguese side as they knocked us out of the competition!’

Like any good bar committed to sport, Richard has always had a keen eye on the slow times, such as evenings when there isn’t a game on. The fact that he has made such a concerted effort to keep football fans happy has meant they remain loyal and still drink there but he also stresses

‘So many customers have come from other bars where the sound is off. I don’t agree with showing a game in silence – we have the product and want to make the most of it’

that the bar does its best to embrace non-football fans.

‘Thanks to the photography, the sport element of the bar is not invasive. We have quality sofas and all the fixtures and fittings are top end – first and foremost, people see us as a nice bar. The reputation for live football is a bonus.’

Food is also important, although as Richard points out, beer is the main earner, particularly during the matches themselves. Because of this, it was decided that a profit on food was not as important as quality, since those who were eating were likely to drink beer.

‘Admittedly, our beer prices are a bit higher than some other pubs, but then we have live sport, comfortable sofas and we’re unique – you don’t get a bar like ours anywhere else. We agreed that a profit on the kitchen just had to be >



Above: Richard believes that one of the main keys to Offside's success is making sure that their customers are always served quickly and efficiently

minimal. We look to the best meat suppliers we can find in order to ensure that everything is really fresh.

'During the World Cup draw last year, we found a local German delicatessen and served up their quality sausages. Our customers loved the meals. While we made virtually no profit on the food, we sold plenty of drink so knew that overall we'd won.

'Drink is the key for us. Eighty per cent of beer sold during a big game will be draught, but we have a cold supply of bottled beers as well to give customers the choice.

'Most important is making sure the customers get served quickly. Despite being a small pub, we'll have four on the bar and two collecting drinks if we've got a capacity crowd. It's not worth trying to save money on staff because the object of the event is to meet the demand of our customers as best we can during that four-hour window.

'At the end of the day, we're here to make sure that the customers can see live football, enjoy a fantastic atmosphere with friendly staff, and ultimately get a good pint of beer in the process.'

Quality and perfection seem to be buzz words for Richard and Offside. The staff are clearly getting it right because the bar has had unlimited praise in reviews. The approach taken by the management is simple, almost common sense. Yet the fact that they are so reluctant to compromise on anything means that it's one of the best places to watch a match in the capital.

WORLD CUP



'When it comes to matches, I know that I won't have to do anything to encourage custom for England. That takes care of itself for us, so I'm more concerned with building trade around some of the smaller games,' says Richard.

During the Euro 2004 tournament, a group of Greek fans asked to reserve an area in the Offside bar. Richard obliged. 'I couldn't have predicted that Greece would win the tournament, but by the final, we'd become a favourite destination for Greek fans. I saw four times the number of customers coming in so it was great for business.'

The Offside bar has also made a name for itself by highlighting different cuisines from around the world. Richard will consider doing that again during the World Cup.

'We hosted an evening for the Let's Kick Racism Out of Football campaign. On that night, we served a variety of dishes, including curry and jerk chicken. Food becomes a way of offering our customers something a bit different.'

In terms of World Cup predictions, Richard is tipping Brazil for top honours, although he believes it will be far from plain sailing for the talented South Americans. 'Everyone at Offside agrees that the crunch match in the group stages will be between the Czech Republic and Italy,' he says. 'If that match is a decider for the group, then the second-placed team faces Brazil. We think the South Americans will struggle against the Italian style of football.'

'If England can avoid host nation Germany in the last 16, then Sven's men should make the quarter-finals at least.

'But it's difficult to predict anything because one or two teams always perform beyond expectations. Whatever happens, it'll be a great tournament for football and business.'