

Opening Lines

OKAY, NOW SHE CAN TALK

After four years of preparing for the World Cup, Meet Boston head Martha Sheridan finally looks back at the billion-dollar predictions, the doubters, and what happened when everyone showed up.

By Jonathan Soroff

Photograph by Ken Richardson



With Brian Bilello, chairman of Boston Soccer 2026, at the 2026 FIFA World Cup branding reveal.

For four years, Martha Sheridan's job was to convince the world that Boston could handle this: seven World Cup matches at Gillette, 60-plus Tall Ships in the harbor, and a commuter rail running express to Foxborough. The economic projections for New England reached $1 billion. The press was considerably less bullish. And the president and CEO of Meet Boston spent much of the run-up unable to say much about either. ¶ Now it's over, and she's finally free to talk. The billion, she says, was probably overly aggressive. Getting to Gillette was harder than anyone planned. The Scots, on the other hand, were something else. The Tartan Army descended on Boston for two matches and drank enough to increase bar and restaurant spending at a higher rate than every other host city. ¶ Sheridan managed a few trips to Nahant in late summer, and a few days after we talked, she's taking a ferry to Block Island. Then comes the 2031 Women's World Cup—and Boston is already angling for a piece of that one, too. We talked about FIFA, the early naysaying, and what she couldn't say until now.

Now that the summer is behind you, what's your assessment? Did it live up to the hype?
This summer exceeded our expectations, to be honest with you. You know, we've been working on planning these events for a very long time, and I don't think you ever really know what to expect, and I think in some cases, some expectations can get overblown. But once the dust has settled and everything is all over, I don't think we could have asked for a better outcome.

How far out do you start planning these kinds of things?
We started the bid process for the FIFA World Cup before my time here, around 2018, or maybe even a little before. And then we received the bid specifically for Boston about four years ago. So you know, once we received the bid, we started planning and getting committees together and then working our way toward executing the event.

Did any of the negative press beforehand give you pause or make you apprehensive?
It was frustrating. You know, nobody actually gets to see behind the curtain as to what's being done. And I was able to do that. I was part of the team that was working on the event. So I knew that a lot of the questions that were being thrown our way, you know, we had great answers, but sometimes we couldn't provide the most candid answers due to the circumstances. So the negative press was definitely frustrating, but at the end of the day, I think we proved them wrong.

It was reported that bar and restaurant spending was up by 28 percent, which was the highest of any host city. Were you surprised by that?
If someone had told me prior

JONATHAN WIGGS/THE *BOSTON GLOBE*

to the event happening that we were going to increase bar and restaurant spending by 28 percent during the match period, I would have said that's just never going to happen. But, you know, when I was traversing the city in real time and visiting our partner restaurants and bars, I knew that this was something very, very different, and there was absolutely a lot of cash exchanging hands for sure.

What do you attribute that to?
Well, the Scots, I'm not gonna lie. I think the Tartan Army is a different breed of fan. People told us about what to expect before they got here, and again, you take that with a grain of salt, but once they descended on Boston, we could see that this was going to be a very different experience for us. The Scottish team had two consecutive games here but they were spread apart by several days. So they were in it for the long haul in Boston. I think that absolutely impacted the activity in bars and restaurants. And two, I think, the local crowd seeing what was going on in Boston with the Tartan Army and with the other teams by the time the matches got under way.

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Local audiences became very intrigued and absolutely wanted to be a part of that scene.

What's one thing that went better than you expected?
I think we got a really good draw. The teams that FIFA put in Boston were better for our destination than we could have anticipated. We got teams that had spirit, had great national followings like Norway and Scotland, but we also got teams that had great local affiliation culturally, so the Haitians, the Moroccans. You know, those teams were beloved by our community, and I think that really lent itself to an overall feeling of joy and happiness in the city of Boston.

The Tall Ships drew millions of people. What was it that made that event click?
I was blown away by the majesty of the Tall Ships. I've seen them before, but this particular installation just seemed so special. I think it was the fact that it was the 250th. I think we had some incredible ships coming into the harbor. I think it was well orchestrated. And I think people just had an extraordinary time watching the spectacle and getting up close and personal with these ships.

Is there anything that went worse than you anticipated?
Getting to Gillette is always a challenge. I know the train system ended up working really well. I think driving to the stadium on certain match days was definitely more of a challenge than we had anticipated it would be. It really depended on the team that was playing and the number of local fans that were driving to the match. So that's something we really couldn't have anticipated. But all in all, law enforcement and transportation officials did a wonderful job of planning for this and really trying to make the best of a 30-mile commute from Boston to Gillette.

Fans paid $85 to $90 round-trip to Foxborough, more than most other host cities charged. Walk me through why. Was that justified?
It was, because I know why they had to charge that fee. The fact that the MBTA had to take commuter rails off their regular lines on match days meant that they had no revenue coming in on those lines on those days. They were

THE LOVE METER

Charting the highs and lows of the city this month.

Stone Cold	Clammy	Mild	Wild	Burning	Hot Stuff
JUDGMENT DAY Another month, another closely watched trial in Massachusetts: Former Stoughton cop Matthew Farwell is scheduled to head to court on a charge of murdering Sandra Birchmore.	**DEFENSELESS** Defense firm Noble Supply and Logistics will lay off its entire Seaport HQ staff this month following a bankruptcy filing. We'd hate for this to be the area's new MO: easy come, easier go.	**FATHER FIGURE** After 24 years at Boston College, "Father Jack" will be formally inaugurated as the school's 26th president on October 16. Football, naturally, comes the next day.	**ROCKET SCIENCE** On October 10, the Museum of Science unveils its new wing, funded by a gift from former NYC Mayor Mike Bloomberg, a Medford native we'll happily claim as one of our own.	**HE'S BACK!** Donnie Wahlberg is back in town—or at least Danny Reagan is—for season two of CBS's *Boston Blue*. Cue the NKOTB fan club.	**TRICK OR TREAT** Salem may get top billing, but Boston has Halloween fun of its own, from Fenway bar crawls to pumpkin painting on the Common. The actual holiday falls on a Saturday this year; do with that what you will.

completely upending their system, and it took a lot of resources to do that. It's also very different from a city like Philadelphia, where people are getting on trains at various points throughout the city. Whereas in Boston, because they were using the commuter rail and it was a point-to-point system, they had to make preparations and plan security and access to South Station for every fan who was taking that train. You can't compare. It's an apples-to-oranges situation.

Early predictions put the total economic impact for New England at $1 billion. Where do you think we ultimately landed?
You know, I don't know where it landed yet. It's going to take some time to really crunch the numbers. I think that was probably overly aggressive. I think it was based on some data that we had received early on from FIFA and from some analysts. We also appreciate the intangible benefits that this summer brought us in terms of exposure for the city of Boston. I think a change in perspective among international travelers about visiting the United States in general, and just overall goodwill. My friend Brian Bilello, from the New England Revolution, said it best: "The World Cup made Boston fall in love with Boston again."

Was FIFA difficult to work with?
You know, I think working with FIFA had its challenges for sure. One was the fact that they had certain sponsors already lined up, which inhibited our ability to secure that type of sponsor for our local organizing committee. I think FIFA had never done an event this large before, utilizing this many host cities. So they were also on a learning curve. And that impacted a lot of decisions they were making that we needed solidified sooner, so that definitely put a crimp in our planning ability. But at the end of the day, I think it all worked out, and I think everybody learned something along the way.

There was also a lot of banging on about: Is this for Bostonians, or is this just for the tourists? How do you think that played out?
I think it was for everyone. There's no question in my mind that this event was embraced by visitors and Bostonians, and when we look at the ticket sales data from the matches, we see that there was, for most matches, a one-third, one-third, one-third division between local and regional New England ticket sales, national, and international. So we know that this appealed to all three demographics.

What would you tell another city that came to you and said, "We're thinking about hosting the World Cup?"
Do it without question. It's an incredible opportunity. I've now become a soccer fan.

What was the biggest lesson you learned from all of this?
We can do hard things here in Boston, and for me personally, it was: Don't let the naysayers get in your head. Just keep your head down, keep doing what you're doing. Listen to the people that have done this before, work with experts who know how this is done, and put faith and trust in them, and it'll all work out.

How do we keep up the momentum?
Our organization, Meet Boston, has been hosting and bidding on large-scale events for quite some time. We were very active, obviously, in these two events, and we've now formed the Greater Boston Sports Commission. The missing piece to all of this was the built-in fundraising mechanism for large-scale events. I'm looking forward to formulating a sports commission that can become a fundraising and operational arm for large-scale events in the city.

Do you see yourself more as a cheerleader or a coach?
Oh, boy. I think I'm a coach, to be honest with you. I tend to get into the thick of things, roll up my sleeves, and try to make contributions to the greater good until it's all happening, and then I'm your biggest cheerleader ever.

Did you ever go to the beach this summer?
I did. I like to take a ride up to Nahant every now and then, so I did manage to get there for a couple of visits and clear my head. I did get some R&R time here and there, but for the most part, that happened after the Tall Ships ended.

Who would you say was the MVP of summer 2026 in Boston?
Um, I mean, I guess I would say two people. I would say it was Dusty Rhodes, who is an Energizer Bunny. She never says no to anything. And then I would say Mike Loynd from the Boston Soccer 2026 host committee, because he kept the ship afloat in spite of difficult and challenging odds and headwinds and did a great job of getting this thing across the finish line.

Where does the 2031 Women's World Cup bid stand?
We are in the mix.

So you think we can do it again?
I absolutely think we can do it again.



BUSÀ PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES (BOSTON SKYLINE); MEET BOSTON (PODCAST); JOSEPH PREZIOSO/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES (FIFA FAN ZONE)

By the Numbers

A Tourist's Best Friend

As head of Meet Boston, Sheridan holds the keys to the city.

40 million+
Visitors to Boston each year.

51 million+
Meet Boston social media impressions in 2025.

3
Seasons of Meet Boston's *Boston Found* podcast.

155,000+
Fans at the FIFA Fan Festival at City Hall Plaza.

26
Michelin Guide recognitions awarded after the guide's first visit to Boston, coordinated by Meet Boston.