

BY STEPHANIE ZONARS

## Pack the House

**C**oaches dream of performing in front of record crowds, yet some struggle to create the kind of excitement around their program that packs the house. No matter where or what you coach, you can help your team increase in the following areas by implementing a few simple ideas.

### REACH OUT TO THE COMMUNITY

During Jane Albright's tenure as the University of Wisconsin women's basketball coach, the number of season ticket holders skyrocketed from next to nothing to more than 7,000. How did she do it? By having her teams reach out to the community. Albright rarely turned down speaking opportunities, she answered all fan mail by hand and she even sent hand-written notes to people who had been mentioned in the local paper for accomplishing something great. In addition, she required her players to complete community service projects with organizations like Habitat for Humanity or Meals on Wheels.

When your community interacts personally with your athletes and sees them as positive role models, a natural desire to support your team develops. Everyone wins—community needs get met, your players learn the value of serving others, and you generate more fans.

The Apostle Paul's reminder in Philippians 2:3-4 offers a helpful perspective: "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too." Guard yourself from allowing your community involvement to become a marketing strategy fueled by selfish motives. Rather, focus on using your coaching platform and influence for the betterment of your players and community, and your program will naturally benefit.



▲ Jane Albright at UW. Fans of Wisconsin women's basketball in the 1990s cheer players. Albright was the winningest coach in Badger history with a 161-107 record (.600) from 1994-2003. She's also credited with helping Wisconsin rank in the top 10 in home attendance in every year since 1995.

### PLAY AN EXCITING STYLE

Like it or not, **sports are entertainment**, and fans who experience an exciting event are much more likely to return. Teams lacking that "entertainment value" may struggle to keep fans coming back. Winning certainly helps, but many fans continue to support competitive, fun-to-watch teams, even if they don't always win.

### CREATE FUN PROMOTIONS

**F-R-E-E** gets people's attention! Hold a Fan Appreciation Day and have each player give a flower to their favorite fan as an invitation to attend the team's year-end banquet. Host an academic night when elementary students and their parents gain free admission with a report card showing A's and B's. Schedule a noon game during the week and invite local elementary and middle school

children whose teachers can use the game as a field trip opportunity. Your imagination holds endless opportunities!

### CREATE LOCAL BOOSTER CLUBS

**Stay connected with alumni.** Because they're already familiar with your program, they represent one of your strongest assets and may gladly form a club to support your team. Or create an athletic association that has donors who invest \$20-\$100 and receive a team schedule and regular newsletter. At Wisconsin, Albright created Jane's Gems, a club of several hundred grade schoolers who received special seating at games, a t-shirt,

letters from coaches and players, a chance to participate in a skills clinic with members of the team, and a pizza party. Also, seek sponsorship from local businesses to help fund these creative clubs and promotions.

### PERSEVERE

Your quest to pack the house may not happen in a season or even two. Consistency is the key. If you implement some solid strategies and stick with them, you're likely to reap a harvest of loyal fans!

*Resource: Wenniger, M.D. (1998, March). Marketing women's teams raises fans...and funds. Women in Higher Education, 7(3), p. 6-7.*



A Certified Life Coach trained by the Institute of Life Coach Training, Stephanie Zonars resources coaches through 1:1 life coaching, team-building sessions, coaches' retreats, and written materials like her 30-day devotional, *Timeout: Moments with God for Winning in Life*. For more information, visit [www.lifebeyondsport.com](http://www.lifebeyondsport.com). Zonars lives in Xenia, Ohio.