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Fields of schemes

To draw fans, teams are ‘throwing things against the wall and seeing what sticks’

by Lindsey Robbins and Chris Huntemann | Staff Writers

Today's visit to a minor league ballpark might feature — besides a baseball game, of course — a pre-game magic show, a host of guests and their dogs, all-you-can-eat packages, a pillow fight and an appearance by the Lone Rangers.

It's all to keep both hardcore fans and casual spectators coming to the games, sports managers say, as they look forward to more profitable seasons now that the recession is over.

From baseball to soccer to lacrosse, Maryland teams are seeing more people returning to the stands and are doing everything they can to keep them there. Aside from mainstays such as the Baltimore Orioles, Baltimore Ravens and Washington Redskins, the state has more than 25 professional teams throughout the year, each fighting for its slice of residents' entertainment dollar.

The U.S. sports industry is worth \$414 billion, with about \$4.3 billion coming from outside the major pro leagues, according to Plunkett Research, a Texas company that analyzes industry sectors.

Last year, many teams concentrated on luring budget-conscious residents who were taking "staycations" rather than traveling for more expensive vacations.

While the "staycation" effect is still in play, consumers are more confident this year, said Brian Shallcross, general manager of the Bowie Baysox, the Orioles AA minor league affiliate.

Shallcross said Baysox attendance is up from last year, aided especially by dry weather.

"Good economy or bad economy, we're cheap entertainment," he said.

Having seen success from its Louie's Kids Club, which includes 10,000 participants, the Baysox also launched a Kids Concert Series to draw more families to the stadium. The series includes two musical acts and a magician, focusing on the team's target demographic of ages 3 to 12.

Last week, the team hosted an on-field pillow fight for fans, billed as the largest pillow fight in Maryland.

Shallcross also wants to start looking into better marketing for seniors.

Dogs and vegetarians

The Southern Maryland Blue Crabs, which is not affiliated with Major League Baseball, has been averaging a steady 3,500 fans at their Waldorf stadium, said spokesman Paul Braverman.

The team plays in the Atlantic League of Professional Baseball Clubs.

To help maintain the population of "Crustacean Nation," the Crabs started offering full-team autographs this year and generally getting players more involved with fans.

The team is also hosting everyday promotions and special events such as Bark in the Park, which allows fans to bring their dogs to certain games, and Wawa Wednesday, when the convenience store chain sponsors free tickets if the team lost the previous Wednesday.

The Hagerstown Suns, a Class A affiliate of the Washington Nationals, is on pace for up to 15 sellouts in its 3,200-seat stadium this season, said president and general manager Robert Flannery. The team has had eight sellouts.

Season-ticket sales have remained "about the same" as last year, Flannery said. The Suns offer an all-you-can-eat package until the middle of the sixth inning, plus discounts on certain merchandise.

The team has sold about 1,200 of those packages, Flannery said, and has "beefed up" its sales department by making some new hires.

The Suns' ballpark was also named the "Friendliest Ballpark for Vegetarians" in minor league baseball by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, he said.

David Ziedelis, general manager of the Frederick Keys, another Orioles affiliate, said the team has averaged 4,250 fans per home game, lamenting that the recent heat wave has hurt more than the recession.

"It's too hot — 65 to 85 degrees is good baseball weather," he said.

The team has offered several promotions to help boost ticket sales, including "Kids Eat Free Mondays."

"We're throwing things against the wall and seeing what sticks," Ziedelis said, adding that the team expects more ticket sales because it has qualified for the playoffs.

The Delmarva Shorebirds, another Orioles affiliate, partners with the Wicomico County Convention & Visitors Bureau to host the opening ceremonies for one of the U.S. Specialty Sports Association's annual Softball World Series tournaments.

The event, which is held for various age groups at sites nationwide, involves about 100 teams traveling to the Shorebirds' stadium in Salisbury, said team general manager Chris Bitters. Some teams come from as far away as Ohio and Kentucky.

"It is a great boost for the local economy and it turns the stadium into a massive playground," Bitters said.

Winning on the field

and the box office

Winning teams are helping Maryland sports overall, said Terry Hasseltine, director of the Maryland Office of Sports Marketing.

"Our professional indoor football team in Baltimore is playing in the finals and the Washington Freedom is having a great year," he said, referring to the Baltimore Mariners of the American Indoor Football

Association, with a record of 14-0 this season, and the Germantown women's soccer team, which has a record of 4-4 with five ties.

"When you put a product on the field that's winning, you're seeing a few more people," he said.

The Freedom also drew sponsors, including Modell's Sporting Goods, for its July Fourth game, during the offseason, said general manager Mark Washo. The return of significant title sponsors is a good sign for the team, which has been averaging 4,000 fans, he said.

The recent FIFA World Cup excitement "definitely helped," he said, adding that the team is hoping for even more attention during the Women's World Cup next summer.

"Anytime soccer comes to town, that's good," Washo said.

Getting people to recognize the team is especially important to the Freedom, which is in its second season with the Women's Professional Soccer league. The team has played in four different leagues since it began in 2001. One of its founding players, former star Mia Hamm, will visit the team July 24.

Fans have also been enjoying the Freedom's new video replay board and enhanced sound system, which were installed in February at a six-figure cost, he said. He said the system also allows the stadium to show sponsors' commercials.

The Chesapeake Bayhawks are also seeking new fans, as the professional lacrosse team is in its first season under new management. The Annapolis team, formerly known as the Baltimore Bayhawks and the Washington Bayhawks, was bought by Brendan Kelly from Jeff Harvey in February.

"The new name helps encompass the whole area. We're not just Baltimore or Washington. We have fans coming from Pennsylvania," said team spokeswoman AnaLise DeVoe.

Looking to grow its fan base, the Bayhawks have launched pregame youth soccer clinics, which cost \$40 for an hour-long training session, group photo with the team and locker room tour. The team also offers an Alumni Rivalry Series so fans can watch university teams compete before games.

"We're really reaching out to kids. In them, we have a fan base for years and years to come," DeVoe said, referring to the Bayhawks' presence at youth camps. "Everywhere you look, there's Bayhawks stuff. And if we're not there yet, we're going to find you."

The team averages 5,000 fans each game.

Crystal Palace Baltimore, another professional soccer team, is hoping for new fans from not only the World Cup hoopla but also the international soccer matches at M&T Bank Stadium.

"People go and look at the experience they have and say, 'Hey, there's a local team around here,'" said Peter Medd, president of Crystal Palace Baltimore. "Families still need things to do on the weekends."

Crystal Palace has been averaging 1,500 fans. The team invested more in its marketing staff this year to help recover the corporate sponsorships it lost during the recession, Medd said.

The team has also struggled to find a permanent home after it was forced out of the University of Maryland, Baltimore, campus for four games this year when new turf was installed on the field. The team is currently playing at the Maryland SoccerPlex in Boyds.

Crystal Palace awaits a Maryland Stadium Authority study on building a \$35 million stadium near M&T Bank Stadium. The study is due this month, Medd said.

"It goes right in line with the state's focus on sports marketing since we can use it to attract people from out of state," he said.

The state and its sports marketing office have been increasing their push to promote Maryland as a sports tourism destination, hosting numerous national and international tournaments and recently picking up the Baltimore Grand Prix, which will have its inaugural race next year.

Most team managers agree that the increased state marketing efforts could work in their favor. For example, families attending a youth sports tournament might also stay to take in a local game.

"It's up to us to capitalize on those opportunities," Shallcross said.