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More 'Fans in Stands' Help Boost University's Brand

By Rich Sloane
UCF Forum columnist
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Central Florida is the seat of hospitality in the Sunshine State — and perhaps the nation. The tourism industry's mantra is “heads in beds,” the measure of economic payoff for having all those theme parks, hotels, restaurants and world-class airport facilities in our backyard. And now it's time for UCF to mirror the mantra and consistently get “fans in stands.”

For some time, UCF has worked hard to fill all the seats at its athletic competitions. Yes, there have been times when fans filled a venue to capacity. Not having been here when former Coach Torchy Clark and UCF basketball were tops in their league, I hear time and again from those who were here that those were the days. You couldn't find an empty seat, they tell me. And judging from the photographs I've seen, the joint was jumping.

But for more than a decade I've sat in stadiums and arenas that were more than half empty while student-athletes gave their all for their university.

It's time we answered the bell, long past time. The Central Florida community needs to get behind its hometown university in a manner worthy of a world-class town. I swell with pride when reflecting on the draw of Walt Disney World, Universal Studios and SeaWorld. These attractions can draw such crowds that on occasion they have to turn guests away.

Yet I sometimes cringe when our football team is featured on national TV because the camera might pan up beyond the lower bowl or near the end zone, where seats are often empty.

Now don't get me wrong. I've skipped a game when the wind got above 50 miles an hour and the rain came sideways. And I watched in the warmth of my home when UCF played at Southern Methodist University in Texas last season in temps below 30 degrees before a crowd of "tens." But by and large, our hometown weather supports fans in stands.

I'm not the first to bemoan the situation. Local sportswriters and broadcasters for years have implored the locals to head out and see top competitors in so many UCF sports. And while football, basketball and baseball seem to get the lion's share of attention from the media, the depth and breadth of UCF athletics is impressive.

UCF is building its brand and image through increased research funding, donor contributions, competitive admissions and an increasing number of nationally ranked academic programs. And the university's investment in athletic programs and student-athletes is an important part of UCF's move to enhance its brand and image, and full support by fans can be a major contributor to that end.

UCF is sporting some of the best collegiate student-athletes there are in track and field, golf, volleyball and tennis, just to mention a few. Many of these student-athletes and UCF teams in recent years have gained national recognition and titles that deserve the support of our townies.

Did I say townies? Well, you'd think with a student population of around 60,000 and more than 10,000 employees, UCF would have no problem filling a 45,000-seat football stadium or 10,000-seat basketball arena. Yet, whether it's Bright House Networks Stadium or CFE Arena, seats still go unfilled. UCF reserves seats for a large number of students for the major sport competitions, and beyond that reasonably priced tickets are available for fans.

No one admits to being a fair-weather fan. I've seen the stadium filled when it first opened in a game against the University of Texas in 2007. I've seen it near empty when the team had a losing season. But that's not the problem. The problem is supporting our team, your team. And as a season ticket holder I've made it my team. I was proud to extend the season last year, make the trip to Arizona and bask in the Fiesta Bowl victory.

Orlando now has professional soccer on its plate. There are a lot of people with vested interest who are hoping the community supports that initiative. If it succeeds, as I hope it does, it will put heads in beds in Central Florida as visitors in town come to watch the games.

UCF has a storied history of athletics going back beyond its first football game against St. Leo in 1979, and the university's Sports Hall of Fame is populated with some of the most talented student-athletes ever to play, coach and support the games: Michelle Akers, Lex Wood, Frank Rohter and Daunte Culpepper, to name a few. And it will see new names added over the years. It's time for all of us to be able to say, "I was there when...."

I recently stood in line for more than three hours with about 500 others to get an autograph from former UCF quarterback Blake Bortles when he came home to Oviedo for a promotion by the Jacksonville Jaguars, the team that just signed him. The joint was jumping.

Torchy would have been proud. I was proud. It's time to get fans in stands at UCF.

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