

Sports of All Sorts

By Tom Schuman

Baseball Tours Equal Big Business

Football might have surpassed baseball in overall popularity in the United States, but plenty of people still have that desire to go to the old ballpark – or two or three around the country – during the summer. That's good news for Greenwood's Glenn Dunlap and his company, Big League Tours.

Teams, travel agencies, hotels and other organizations offer multi-game packages for fans. But Big League Tours, and its handful of competitors across the country, take the experience to a new level. For Dunlap, that includes behind-the-scenes stadium tours, visits with former major league players, prime seats, and transportation and accommodations that remind participants

that they indeed are on vacation.

"The former major league players (Cincinnati's Tom Browning, Al Hrabosky in St. Louis, Len Barker, Ron Kittle and Vida Blue, among others) do meet and greets, sign autographs. You get to ask questions of the players and hear their stories," Dunlap reveals. "Bill Lee (a left-handed pitcher affectionately known as the "Spaceman" for his unorthodox behavior) toured Fenway Park in Boston with us and added his funny anecdotes from a player's perspective."

Big League Tours has more than doubled its trip offerings for 2008, with 13 listed on the web site. Some of the combinations: Astros and Rangers games in Texas; Arizona and San Diego on a southwest tour; and Red Sox, Yankees and Hall of Fame stops on one of several East Coast trips. Sales in 2007 were four times higher than in the initial season. In

mid-January of this year, 2007 sales figures had already been matched.

Who makes the investment – from approximately \$800 per person to several thousand dollars apiece, depending on the length and the itinerary – to see the game from a different perspective?

"Baseball lovers across generations," Dunlap states. "Couples, fathers and sons, guys trips. It's been fun to see multi-generational trips with grandfathers talking to their grandsons about certain players or stadiums. Baseball is different, each of the stadiums are unique; they have different characters."

A number of fans have the strong desire to see a game in all 30 major league stadiums. Dunlap, who has enjoyed taking various family members on the trips with him, and Big League tours are there to help.

Resource: Big League Tours at (317) 534-2475 or www.bigleaguestours.com



Young Big League Tour participants view Yankee Stadium from the home team's dugout.

Fort Wayne Franchises Earn Support

We're No. 1 is the hoped-for chant for sports fans, no matter the team or level of play. Fort Wayne can proudly utilize the phrase after being named the top minor league sports city in the country in 2007 by *Street & Smith's SportsBusiness Journal*.

Why Fort Wayne, which was an original member of the National Basketball Association in 1949 until the Pistons moved to Detroit eight years later? There are the Class A baseball Wizards (in town since 1993), the Freedom (the latest indoor football league entry), basketball (the Fury of the Continental Basketball Association for a decade, followed by the current Mad Ants of the

National Basketball Development League, better known as the D-League) and the torchbearer – the hockey Komets that have called Memorial Coliseum home since 1952.

Scott Sproat is executive VP for sales and marketing with the Komets, following 10 years with the Fury. He says it's taking care of business in the community that makes the difference, even more than performance on the ice, court, diamond or field.

"We're no different than a restaurant, gas station or clothing store," Sproat claims. "We're a small business. We have customers; we have a responsibility to the community. We don't run a hockey team. We run a small business."

Sproat adds that, "It's not the community's responsibility to support the team, but the team's responsibility to earn that support."

For the Komets, in particular, he says that players remain in the community following their careers. They work in the city and they raise their families there. While there is no "build it and they will come" at play, he firmly believes that "very early on, the Komets and Fort Wayne got it right."

It's generally accepted that club executives have to work a little harder and a little smarter at the minor league level. The advantage, however, is that there are not as many rules that must be followed.

"The National Football League has been called the No Fun League. We're the EFL – Everything Fun League. Minor league sports are all about fun," Sproat contends.

While the action has been focused on the longstanding Coliseum and its adjacent Memorial Stadium, a new downtown ballpark in the works for the Wizards as part of the Harrison Square project will undoubtedly be big business for the city.

Resource: Learn more about the teams at www.fwsportscorp.org



The Komets have been a Fort Wayne fixture for 56 years.

Amateur Athletes Come — and Spend Their Money

It's not just the professionals who have the sports market cornered. While amateur sports served as one of the cornerstones of Indianapolis' revitalization over the past three decades, communities big and small across the state are attracting visitors – and their wallets.

Count Columbus among 20-plus cities with a strong focus on sports tourism. Numerous baseball and softball tournaments are complemented by local, state and regional events in golf, hockey, rugby, soccer, swimming, tennis and more.

Lynn Lucas, executive director of the Columbus Area Visitors Center, points out that conservative estimates put the numbers at \$15 million in direct spending in 2008. The focus over the last five years began when the city was invited to bid for a United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA) softball World Series. A partnership between the Visitors Center and the city's Parks Department was formed. Making the out-of-town visitors feel most welcome has led to numerous USSSA and other tournaments coming back to southeastern Indiana on an annual basis.

"Without the support of the entire community, we could not have grown this the way we have," Lucas affirms. "The first year with the World Series, we needed special fencing and 20 to 25 business sponsors stepped up immediately. It takes more than 300 volunteers, a lot of them from business

Action takes place on the field and in the community when USSAA World Series participants come to Columbus. (Columbus Republic photo/Mike Dickbernd)



and industry, to help with hospitality. We do what we need to do to make these teams feel very special.”

A good location and existing first-rate facilities are essentials to getting started, but the success is spawning new developments. Both indoor and outdoor multi-sports complexes are in the works. Two new downtown hotels, part of the Vision 2020 development plan, are at least a partial byproduct of the steady flow of sports visitors. The nearby outlet mall off Interstate 65 experiences a strong bump in business, particularly in conjunction with girls’ tournaments.

Lucas says city and county officials work well together, with attendance at national trade shows part of the effort. Communities across the state are also collaborating to raise the visibility of sports tourism. The Kelley School of Business at Indiana University is conducting a statewide economic impact study.

Resource: Columbus Area Visitors Center at www.columbus.in.us

IHSAA Wants Big Events in Indianapolis

With professional and college sports playing a dominating role in Indianapolis, the Indiana High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) seems to be saying “don’t forget about us.”

A study released in late 2007 shows high school championship events attracting more than 140,000 annual visitors to the capital city with those from outside the area contributing more than \$36 million to the economy. IHSAA Commissioner Blake Ress clearly states one of the reasons for the review.

“I’ve found groups that come into the city and have events here, and they get better deals with the venues than I do. I pay higher rentals than people who come in on a one-time deal,” Ress reports. “We’re taken for granted – the fact that we’re in Indianapolis and (they think) we’re going to come here. I think we needed to show we’ve got some value to what we bring.”

The commissioner says it makes sense for schools, teams and fans to have events in the central part of the state. In recent years, state finals competitions have taken place in Muncie (volleyball), Bloomington (track and field) and Terre Haute (cross country), among other locations.

A far smaller price tag and ease in working with venue officials contributed to those moves, Ress says.

Ress didn’t know what to expect from this first study, conducted by Mark Rosentraub of Cleveland State University. Rosentraub, a former IUPUI professor, has done similar work for the Colts, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis. Not counting the spending by local residents, he says, makes the \$36 million figure conservative.

“People experienced in this looked at the numbers and said they’re meaningful,” Ress offers. “I think the atmosphere is better than what it has been in the past for corporate support. Some people feel that doing something locally will

have a bigger bang for the buck than what they might do nationally.”

Indiana Farm Bureau has been the leading long-term corporate partner of the IHSAA. A current negotiation of that contract will help determine where the association goes next in the effort to attract additional business sponsors and partners.

Resource: Indiana High School Athletic Association at www.ihsaa.org

A state finals record crowd witnesses the IHSAA’s Class 5A state championship at the RCA Dome in November 2007.

