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The U of M's Bureau of Sport and Leisure Commerce teams up with the Memphis Redbirds to give students real-world sports marketing experience.

Swinging for the fences

by Eric Smith

With his right index finger held high, David McAlister swaggers through an enclave of offices inside the Elma Roane Fieldhouse, signaling to his classmates that he has just closed a sale.



With their sights set on a career in sports, (left to right) Ryan Luttrell, David McAlister, Katy Schuberth and Aaron Hitchcock took part in the newly formed Sport Sales Training Program, offered through the College of Education's Bureau of Sport and Leisure Commerce.

After the senior Sport and Leisure Management major has made his rounds — and made his point — he heads back to the phone.

"All right," he says as he softly claps his hands. "Let's get some more sales."

His fellow students glance at McAlister and then at one another, knowing they've been put on notice. Though most of them have closed plenty of sales and experienced similar moments of triumph, their resolve to match McAlister's success is strengthened.

"That puts gas on the fire," admits Aaron Hitchcock (BBA '96), who is working toward an MS in Sport and Leisure Commerce.

A competitive spirit, albeit a friendly one, indeed fuels these graduate and undergraduate students, who are seeking more than just good grades.

In some ways this is a typical college setting — strewn with tables and chairs, textbooks and notebooks — but since last fall it's become much

more than that. This is a training lab unlike any in the country. This is mission control for the University of Memphis' newly formed Sport Sales Training Program (SSTP), which is being run by the Bureau of Sport and Leisure Commerce, housed within the College of Education's Health and Sport Sciences department.

The U of M has teamed up with the Memphis Redbirds to help them with a portion of their ticket sales campaign. In return, students will receive invaluable, real-world training.

"This is a meaningful, high-level experience," says Dr. Richard Irwin, Bureau director.

The University and the Redbirds, the Triple-A affiliate of the St. Louis Cardinals, are working together under an innovative three-year agreement that offers sports marketing majors the opportunity to make actual sales calls and generate actual revenue, whether it's renewing individual season tickets or group packages, or even landing new business.

Though the Redbirds are a minor-league baseball club, this is clearly the majors for these handpicked students. Because with the experience they'll garner from a few months working in tandem with a professional sports organization, they should enjoy bountiful career opportunities upon graduation.

For this, they can thank the vision of Irwin and a burgeoning sports scene in Memphis.

Play ball!

Twelve years ago, Memphis wasn't exactly a sports hotbed. There were no major-league franchises in sight, and the Double-A Memphis Chicks were languishing in decrepit Tim McCarver Stadium and preparing to bolt for Jackson, Tenn. Besides U of M football and men's basketball and the annual pro golf and tennis tournaments, there wasn't much to draw a serious fan's interest.

Sports jobs in Memphis were limited, to say the least, but that didn't stop the U of M from helping prepare students for the numerous opportunities that lay elsewhere. In 1994 the University established the Bureau of Sport and Leisure Commerce to groom students for careers in sports, even if that meant sending them to more fruitful job markets.

Soon after the Bureau's inception, Memphis' sports fortunes began to change. The Memphis Motorsports Park and the minor-league hockey Memphis RiverKings prospered. The Chicks left in 1997, but the higher-profile Redbirds arrived the next year. Then the biggest jackpot came when the NBA's Grizzlies relocated from Vancouver to Memphis in 2001. With the addition of those two franchises, and the construction of AutoZone Park and FedExForum, the Bluff City finally shed its minor-league image.

As Memphis grew into a true sports town, the Bureau also grew, drawing more and more students to the allure of a booming sports industry that was finally flourishing in the U of M's backyard.

"Memphis," Irwin says, "is a great place to study this stuff."

Ryan Luttrell is working toward a BPS in Legal Aspects of Sports Management. He was immediately drawn to the Bureau's class offerings because he hopes to be a sports attorney, and he knows that Memphis' newfound reputation as a sports town will enhance his U of M education.

"I think this is the perfect market because it's not too big and it's not too small," Luttrell says. "There are plenty of opportunities here for sports marketing, for a program like this. It's a great location. It's centrally located. I just see it getting better and better and better."

For all the success the Bureau achieved in its first decade, Irwin saw one major issue that needed to be addressed — sales. Though students were landing sports marketing jobs locally and nationally, Irwin figured it was time to truly bolster his students' résumés by giving them real-world sales experience.

In summer 2005, after years of discussing it, Irwin and Redbirds vice president of sales and marketing Kerry Sewell (BBA '93) united to create a sport sales program that would take students beyond the classroom. With some last-minute scrambling to complete the curriculum and enroll students, Irwin and Sewell successfully launched the Sport Sales Training Program that fall.

"We've been hearing for quite some time that we've done an inadequate job of preparing people for careers in sports marketing," Irwin says. "We are responding to industry need and industry criticism."

For Sewell, who hires sales personnel every year, the program's debut was long overdue.

"One of the big holes is that these kids are coming in and they're struggling selling," Sewell says. "They can't sell, or they haven't been trained well enough to sell. You can go through and take all the marketing classes in the world and that's great, but at some point ... they're going to probably be in a sales position or have some sales responsibilities. What we saw was a lot of people coming in not prepared for that."

Batter up!

College sales classes typically don't offer much more than theory. And unless sports marketing majors land a dynamic internship they too often leave the University with a diploma in hand but no real sales experience.

"It's hard to get to the nuts and bolts," Irwin admits.

Instead, students role-play using various sales scenarios. They work on telesales scripts. They place mock sales calls. They hone their sales technique in a simulated, safe and sterile environment. Rarely do they face real-life objections, and rarely do they have a company's bottom line at stake. The training program was designed to be different. Here, students call Redbirds season-ticket holders and ask them to renew — and the outcomes vary with each call.

"This is one of the great aspects of the class," Sewell says. "This is picking up the phone and talking to a real person on the other line who has the ability to say 'Yes' or 'No' and to offer a conversation and take it in a different way."

The sales responsibilities go beyond existing customers. Second-semester students in the program are charged with creating leads, making cold calls and trying to generate an aggregate \$1 million in revenue. Despite these tangible goals, the program's benefits will be immeasurable once the students let prospective employers know they have logged dozens of hours on the phone with real customers and produce thousands of dollars in sales for a professional sports organization.

"This is more than what students can learn from a textbook," Irwin says. "From the students' perspective, they are getting professional oversight that few other students are getting."

Much of that professional oversight comes from Irwin and Sewell, but also from Redbirds ticket sales manager Steve Berneman, who mentors the nine students currently enrolled in the program. This semester, there are four veterans and five rookies in the program, a mix of graduate and undergraduate students who are made to feel like part of the Redbirds' team.

"I treat them like employees," Berneman says. "They bought into that because they're good people. That was the easy part."

Getting the students to feel like employees may have been easy, but getting them to call that first customer wasn't. Katy Schuberth, who is earning an MS in Sport and Leisure Commerce, was especially timid when it was her turn to call after the mock sessions ended.

"I was so scared to get on those phones," says Schuberth. "I thought, 'Oh, I worked at the Gap, so I can sell. It's not going to be that hard.' But, oh, my gosh, once we got into it, we were petrified."

To aid in their calls, and to ease their minds, the students and Berneman created sales scripts, which listed talking points for convincing season-ticket holders to renew. These included ways to overcome objections and ways to enhance the customer's experience at

the ballpark. As the students became more comfortable with the Redbirds products, like learning the AutoZone Park seating charts, they were able to increase their sales and put the script away for more fluid phone conversations.

"Once you get going," Schuberth says, "you know it."

And as Berneman watches the progress of his protégés, he knows the program is a home run, one that through the middle of April had produced \$400,000.

"We're developing a group of students who have already proven to be really good," he says.

Pennant chase

The main hub of the Bureau includes a few offices, a central conference room and a side room that has been turned into the Sport Sales Training Center, replete with phones and computer terminals hooked up to the Redbirds' ticketing network so students can update the system when making calls and making sales.

Irwin is quick to point out that this is not a boiler room — or a sweatshop.

"It's not a ploy by the Redbirds to generate revenue without paying a sales force," he says.

By entrusting some of their sales to students rather than paid and polished employees, the Redbirds might actually be losing some renewals. But for Sewell there is a greater good being served, and much more will be known when the Bureau completes follow-up research on the program's first year.

"We'll make sure we haven't compromised our own way of doing business by turning over X-number [of sales] to the University," Sewell says. "What did that do to us? Did that jeopardize us in any way? We'll assess that at the end."

Regardless of numbers, Sewell hopes the program continues to feed qualified sports marketers into the Redbirds organization as it did with Elise Weaver (one of the program's first participants) and McAlister, who just accepted a job with the Redbirds, as well as into other sports properties around town.

"Whether it's here, with the Memphis Motorsports Park, with the Grizzlies, these kids are going to come in and be more prepared," Sewell says. "That would be really reinforcing and make me feel good about what we're doing."

"I believe in this class," Sewell adds. "I have a passion for the industry and a passion for the University. I've been able to take a couple of

things that I love and put them together."

The passion is reciprocal. Thanks to the Redbirds' commitment to the U of M, graduates will have an edge when competing with students from other universities for jobs in a competitive industry.

"They're giving back to us," Irwin says, "and we're using that to provide the students an experience they wouldn't get anywhere else."

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