



Making Sports Teams Work for You:

How to Leverage the Power of Sports in your Organization



Harness America's passion for sports for the good of your organization's mission.

By Allison Collinger

Just a game? Not really. American sports are an integral part of the fabric of our culture. The passion we have for sports influences our national character and how we spend our time. In fact, the Super Bowl has almost become another national holiday. But sports aren't merely a way to spend a Sunday afternoon; sports aren't just entertainment. Sports are a business, a big business! Sports happen to be one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the United States, bringing in an estimated \$213 billion annually.

Sports teams can be powerful allies in getting the word out about your organization.

Make sure you've clearly explained the value and the fit.

Why not capture the power of sports for your organization? Sports teams can be powerful allies in getting the word out about your organization. (Individual athletes can be helpful, too; see "Tips for Working with Athletes" on page 7.)

Teams are often looking for an association with a respected charitable partner, an important cause, and programs run by nonprofit organizations. Many teams have their own foundations, employee volunteer programs, and other initiatives to give back to the community.

As a nonprofit, you may be looking for the visibility and access to assets that a sports team can provide. If you've always wanted to link up with a team, here are some steps to leveraging sports to advance your mission.

Step One: Where do you start? Begin by asking yourself a few simple questions. What makes your organization special? What are your challenges? How could a sports

team help you meet your challenges? Why should they care? What does your organization bring to the table?

Like all forms of corporate giving and cause-related marketing, sports philanthropy ranges widely in terms of what you can gain and what you need to put into the relationship. You may be looking for something as simple as the donation of a few signed jerseys or as substantial as thousands of dollars of grant money. It's usually best to start small and build your relationship slowly. For ideas, see "Know What You Offer and What You Gain" on page 7.

Step Two: Do your homework. Learn all you can about sports teams in your area – their programs, objectives, and brand of philanthropy. Don't overlook minor-league sports. Is there a fit? How will a team help you, and what can you do for them? Can your organization help enhance one of their current efforts?

For example, the St. Louis Rams are passionate about character,

particularly when drafting future NFL players. A few years ago, the Cooperating School Districts wanted to rebrand their character education program and boost interest in their initiatives. At the same time, the Rams were looking for a way to increase their presence in area schools and reinforce good character as a core value. Together they created a curriculum and video featuring vignettes from Ram players,

Know What You Offer and What You Gain

What Can Athletes and Teams Do for You?

Here are a few possibilities:

- **Serve** as celebrity guests at your events.
- **Appear** in public-service announcements about your cause.
- **Sign** your fundraising letters.
- **Staff** booths at your fair or other event.
- **Contribute** signed balls and other memorabilia for your auction or lottery.
- **Provide** grants for your programs.
- **Attend** your events, perhaps filling whole tables with their friends and team members.
- **Donate** tickets to their games.

What Can They Gain from You?

You can help the sports team and athletes accomplish the following:

- **Attain** an image of good citizenship.
- **Enjoy** the benefits of giving and volunteering.
- **Raise** visibility within a new populace.
- **Be recognized** for doing good in the community.
- **Infuse** team members with more motivation and a sense of connection and pride.
- **Create** a culture of compassion and caring.
- **Broaden** their range of influence.
- **Connect** with the community.

CREATIVE FUNDRAISING IDEA

Tip-a-Player Event Earns Big Bucks for Charity

One popular event that garners tens of thousands of dollars for charity is the Tip-a-Player Dinner and Sports Carnival hosted by the Hartford Wolf Pack Community Foundation in Hartford, Connecticut. Wolf Pack hockey players earn “tips” as they compete for “Puck Bucks” — Monopoly-type money — by serving dinner, signing autographs, posing for photos, and auctioning off their jerseys. Income from the event, including “tips,” sponsorships, ticket sales, and a silent auction, exceeds \$70,000 a year.

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resulting in increased interest and participation in the program.

Step Three: Draft a letter. Write down your ideas, and articulate clear benefits to both you and the team. Be sure to cover *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*. Then set your letter aside. Later, read it over, and make sure you’ve clearly explained the value and the fit.

Step Four: Choose a champion. Find someone who’s passionate

about your organization and has a connection with the team you want to approach. Find out if any of your board members are employed by a team sponsor. Ask your staff — both paid and volunteer — if they know someone associated with the team.

Step Five: Finalize your letter. When you’ve identified a champion, arrange for that person to sign your

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Tips for Working with Athletes

By Tiffani Wilson

Individual athletes, like sports teams, can partner with your organization in many ways. Here are some things to remember if you want to collaborate with individual athletes:

- **Before approaching** an athlete with a proposal, do your homework. Read bios and articles about the athlete; see if you have common interests.
- **To reach** a specific player, contact the team’s community-relations department to find the best way to contact that athlete, or send a letter directly.
- **Invite** the athlete to visit your organization or attend one of your events.
- **When you meet** with the athlete, remember to have specific requests in mind and be direct about what you want.
- **Let the player offer** a donation; don’t ask.
- **Get approval** from the athlete’s team before you ask the player for something, and be selective in your asks. If there are people in place on the team to facilitate requests for athletes, make sure to use them.
- **When working** with players, have realistic expectations, and make it as easy as possible for them to work with you. Respect their time. Always let the athlete be the star, but be sure that your event doesn’t revolve around the player.

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letter, asking for a time to meet and explore possibilities. Then send your letter.

Step Six: Meet. Go with your champion to the meeting. Be sure to listen to what the sports people have to say. Be flexible and open to suggestions. Describe ways you can help them. Discuss how you'll be working with them.

Step Seven: Communicate. If you sell your cause well and a partnership is created, work with your partner to determine what success will look like for everyone involved. Communicate the partnership using all your organization's communication vehicles — Web site, e-news, newsletters, remarks at events and board meetings, and signage. You can always help out a team's staff by being an extra pair of arms and legs in promoting their efforts. There are so many ways to recognize the partnership that don't cost money but are visible signs of your association with the team.

Step Eight: Report back. Do you deliver? Are you meeting the objectives for the partnership? Going back to what both parties want, how are you doing? Are there ways you can improve? Have you delivered on your commitments? How can you show your value?

Creating meaningful partnerships takes time and effort, but can yield great results for your organization. ■

Teams are often looking for an association with a respected charitable partner.

Out of the Box

Useful Web sites:

- www.sportsphilanthropy.com
- Web sites of various athletic teams
- Web site of the Association of Fundraising Professionals (www.afpnet.org) and other professional organizations.

Articles from *Nonprofit World*, available at www.snpo.org:

- Making the Business-Nonprofit Partnership a Win-Win (Vol. 22, No. 1)
- How to Target Corporations to Diversify Your Funding Mix (Vol. 25, No. 1)
- For-Profits and Nonprofits Meet Missions Together (Vol. 25, No. 4)
- Take the Collaboration Quiz (Vol. 24, No. 3)
- Enlightened Self-Interest: Selling Business on the Benefits of Cause-Related Marketing (Vol. 15, No. 4)
- PSAs, the Olympics of Nonprofit Advertising (Vol. 23, No. 5)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Resource Development (www.snpo.org/li).

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A 10-year veteran of the NFL with the St. Louis Rams, Allison Collinger is a frequent speaker on sports philanthropy, marketing, and communications. This article is based on her remarks at a meeting of the Association of Fundraising Professionals. Allison has more than 17 years' experience in the sports industry and is a national expert on effective sports philanthropy. She is the founder of AHC Consulting LLC, a company that provides strategic communications, planning, training, and facilitation services. Before forming her own firm, Collinger served as the director of corporate communications and community outreach for the St. Louis Rams – overseeing the Rams' community outreach team, the Rams Foundation, and the team's off-the-field public-relations initiatives.

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