



Not the same game

BY GARY BROWN

Women's college basketball seeks balanced growth

Women's basketball has expanded exponentially from its humble roots. Regular-season attendance has topped 8 million each of the past two years, and an ESPN contract now ensures coverage of every game of the Division I championship.

But women's basketball also remains a well-kept secret. Average Division I attendance is 1,600, a sign of trouble for some but a boon for many fans who appreciate knowing they can wake up one morning, decide to go to the game that night, park close to the arena, get good seats without walloping the wallet and be entertained by highly skilled yet personable student-athletes who play classic basketball.

Therein lies a conundrum: If the appeal of women's basketball rests with its intimacy, then can the nature of the game and its surroundings change without alienating the bedrock fans who have loved women's basketball for what it is?

It is the thorniest of questions, and the answer seems complicated.

However uncertain the course may be, those entrusted with developing women's basketball believe that the sport can thrive as its own brand. What's needed is a unique marketing model that attracts new fans without disenfranchising the loyal fans and admitting, with some level of comfort, that all basketball is *not* created equal.

Julie Hermann, the executive senior associate AD at Louisville, lives squarely in the middle of the dual basketball world. The Cardinals men's basketball program is a traditional power, and the women's team ascended to the championship game of the Women's Final Four earlier this year.

The second outcome has been regarded, only somewhat facetiously, as a mixed blessing.

"I liked coming when the crowds were 6,000," one donor told her, "but I'm not happy when you have 20,000 fans in there, Julie."

The donor was mostly joking, but the remark provided a grain of truth. The fuller the house, the more likely that the fan looking for affordable family entertainment gets pushed to the upper deck and farther away from the players – both literally and figuratively.

Of course, Hermann and her peers prefer the 20,000. They just have to persuade the original supporters to embrace the change. Louisville is a prime example of how it can be done. The Cardinals have gone from relative obscurity to a dynamic coach, a No. 1 WNBA draft pick, a championship-game appearance and a thriving fan following in just a few years.

Hermann, who oversees Louisville's women's basketball marketing efforts, said for years the women's game has appealed primarily to parents as inexpensive entertainment for them and their children, to women who enjoy seeing other women be successful and to retirees who appreciate opportunities for women. On the other hand, she said, fans come to the men's game for two main reasons: The athletes are extraordinary, and it is absolutely a "see-and-be-seen" atmosphere in Freedom Hall.

"We have targeted our approach largely to that women's demographic," Hermann said, "but we also have been able to add those components over time that our female players are great athletes, too, and the women's games provide another opportunity to see and be seen."

To that end, Hermann's crew identified about 70 of the most powerful women in the city and offered them the courtside seats that had been used only at the men's games. Even though many of those women weren't even sports fans, they were lured by access to what became their very own Rotary Club at a women's basketball game.

That interest compounded because of the business element, Hermann said.

"The see-and-be-seen element at the men's game flourishes because so much business is done there," Hermann said. "People hobnob and network and do business there – so much so that their company pays the ticket cost for many of them."

"That notion is the same for women. These women aren't going to write us a \$1,000 check to be a fan, but now, the president of Chase Bank and the president of Women for Women and other companies have all decided that it's worth it to their organization to have their people there because the other people who are there absolutely make it worth that company's cost."

The price of attendance can be a delicate matter since low ticket prices are part of the current appeal of women's basketball. But as the popularity escalates, so might the costs. So far, that's not the case at most places.

At up-and-comer California, the women's games cost just a buck for kids, and they get face-painting, poster-making, jump houses, autograph sessions and dance team performances in addition to a great game.

"Those 90 minutes of pregame activities coupled with the game itself ends up being a very affordable outing for families," said Megan Mosness, director of the game-day experience at California.

Mosness isn't afraid to give tickets away, either. She said revenue has doubled in the past two years despite the number of free tickets doubling, as well. Most marketers aren't afforded such freebie flexibility, but Mosness said, "You can target your comps strategically in ways that generate return, paying customers."

Kids have a ball at Iowa State, too. Cyclones marketing administrator Mary Pink said \$49 buys a youth season ticket, including conference games – an option not available on the men's side.

Others, though, think half-price sales and special promotions risk devaluing the season ticket – or even women's sports in general.

Journalist Laura Pappano, a writer-in-residence at the Wellesley Centers for Women who is studying ticket prices for Division I sporting events, wrote in *The Christian Science Monitor*, "There aren't many bargains in sports, but one of them is NCAA Division I women's college basketball – and that's a problem."

She said charging less to watch women "devalues their play and perpetuates stereotypical economic disparities between men and women." She asserted that women's sports have for too long been priced as "Saturday-afternoon birthday party fare" rather than a "top-shelf Saturday night event-worthy social gathering."

Pappano used Louisville as an example, in fact, claiming that the women's fans there got the far-better "deal" with a season ticket about nine times less expensive than the men's – at the expense of the women's game's reputation.

But Louisville's Hermann said the situation for women's basketball is more about supply and demand than an aspirational desire for gender equality.

"The lion's share of the women's basketball fan base here is very different from the men's, partly because even in a town the size of ours, there are just so many people who can pay \$100,000

See WOMEN'S GAME, page 52



Grass-roots grants grow the game

The NCAA is working inside out to turn the women's basketball marketing paradigm upside down.

A grant program established two years ago funnels about \$750,000 a year to successful applicants who can demonstrate their ability to meet the program's purpose, which is to increase attendance and awareness of the game through marketing at the grass-roots level. The NCAA recently awarded grants to 14 schools and four conferences, ranging in diversity from Cornell to UCLA and from the Patriot League to the WAC.

Success stories from the first year of the program included Texas Tech, which doubled its student attendance for home games, and Florida State, which increased season-ticket sales by 63 percent and generated a 55 percent increase in overall attendance. East Tennessee State increased its average attendance by 231 percent. Several grant recipients set single-game records.

Texas Tech created a student promotion called "Get in to Win," which gave students an opportunity to win the equivalent of in-state tuition for the 2009-10 academic year by coming to 10 or more games.

"At Texas Tech, we have a great women's basketball following, and the students were a marketing

area that we thought we could really work on and significantly increase attendance," said Elvis Moya, the school's director of marketing and promotions for women's basketball.

The jump of about 1,000 in student attendance made noise locally and nationally, as well.

"There was a buzz across campus, as well as in the town of Lubbock," Moya said. "Several coaches from around the country called and asked how we were able to do that."

"When resources are allocated and efforts are focused to promote women's basketball, it can provide a meaningful return on the investment," said Sue Donohoe, NCAA vice president for Division I women's basketball. "The membership has had a tremendous interest in securing grant resources to advance the game. It is important that we continue to work to grow women's basketball from the inside out and at the grass-roots level."

The marketing initiative came from a blue-ribbon panel established several years ago and chaired by NCAA President Myles Brand that included head coaches, media representatives, former student-athletes, and conference, institutional and Women's Basketball Coaches Association administrators.

— Gary Brown

2008-09 Division I attendance leaders for women's basketball

School	G	Att.	Avg.
Tennessee	15	209,991	13,999
Connecticut	20	210,584	10,529
Iowa St.	16	156,057	9,754
Oklahoma	17	153,116	9,007
Purdue	15	134,559	8,971
Maryland	15	133,336	8,889
Texas Tech	18	154,367	8,576
New Mexico	22	163,230	7,420
Notre Dame	14	100,355	7,168
Louisville	16	110,063	6,879
Duke	14	93,639	6,689
Baylor	16	104,925	6,558
Michigan St.	16	93,501	5,844
Minnesota	15	87,501	5,833
Wisconsin	17	92,517	5,442
Texas	16	84,600	5,288
Texas A&M	14	73,578	5,256
Vanderbilt	16	76,150	4,759
Missouri St.	14	66,498	4,750
Kansas St.	14	64,743	4,625



Women's Game

continued from page 50

for a seat donation to get a ticket to a sporting event, which is what they're doing at men's basketball," she said. "Now if there are people willing to do that for women's basketball, we have no problem charging the expensive seat donation. But you run out of those people quickly.

"We are raising our own crop of people who aren't alarmed to pay a \$700 seat donation for women's basketball. So long as we have empty seats in women's basketball, we're not going to be able to put a premium on any seat. You have to get people in the seats, get them attached, make them happy that this is where they invest and then build a culture where people expect to have to pay at women's basketball. The notion of implying a value on the product based on the ticket price, as the Wellesley writer argues, is wrong because if you price the tickets equally, you'll have no one at the women's games."

If women's basketball were to achieve the same popularity as the men's game, would it come with all of the male trappings?

Mary Jo Kane thinks so. She directs Minnesota's Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport, the first and only university-based institute for research on girls and women in sport. As women's basketball increases in scale, more schools will pressure their teams to win, she said. And if there are rewards – particularly financial – for those victories, then the women's game is likely to follow the path charted by the men. That may be good in some ways, but not in others.

"Basketball is the national sport for women, and more programs are starting to devote resources to win," Kane said. "That's both good and bad. Yes, women's basketball will continue to become more like the men's version, and there will be a cheating scandal or an academic-fraud case. And coaches will continue to be paid more, and they will be fired for not winning.

"That doesn't mean women's basketball stakeholders shouldn't be hypervigilant, but I don't see where you can have one (men's basketball) and have the other (women's basketball) not naturally try to follow."

Even if the resources suddenly became available, Donna Lopiano, who oversaw the women's athletics department at Texas for 18 years before becoming executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation, believes it would be a mistake for marketers

to employ the male model by rote.

Lopiano said the target market for men's basketball is corporate, young male and more student body, whereas the season-ticket holders for women's basketball tend to be young families with daughters (typically who play sports) and the grandparents of those families. She said her staff at Texas conducted a study that found less than a 5 percent overlap between men's and women's basketball fans.

"That core group – though it may be only about 3,000-5,000 – is there win or lose, and you cannot take it for granted," Lopiano said. "Sometimes men's mar-

keting is so advanced that they have not attended to those core fans, and they don't realize that in that core group will be donors of considerable significance."

Lopiano believes the women's game can prosper by building the core audience, with the understanding that such an approach requires patience.

Louisville's Hermann agreed, noting that growth comes "one handshake at a time." But she also understands the pressure to win.

"The women's basketball crowd at Louisville may be niche for now," Hermann said, "but we have a coach who is going to soon command a million-dollar salary, and you can't have that salary if at some point you're not a for-profit sport. We have to move toward a profit at some point; otherwise, that's a bad business model and will keep setting women's sports back."

Division I women's basketball attendance (1999-2009)

Year	Total	Avg.	Change
2008-09	8,042,040	1,664	- 48,044
2007-08	8,090,084*	1,694*	+ 203,877
2006-07	7,886,207	1,655	+ 792,565
2005-06	7,093,642	1,575	+ 25,811
2004-05	7,067,831	1,578	- 105,546
2003-04	7,173,377	1,617	- 178,257
2002-03	7,351,634	1,619	+ 413,821
2001-02	6,937,813	1,590	+ 418,146
2000-01	6,519,667	1,524	+ 162,938
1999-00	6,356,729	1,491	+ 515,795

*Record

See WOMEN'S GAME, page 54

The house that Tennessee built

Though it might be hard to believe, the Tennessee Lady Vols, who can draw a crowd just by conducting a practice, attracted only 53 people to their first game in 1974.

Now the perennial leader in home attendance and an arena-filler on the road, as well, the nation's gold standard for women's basketball programs nonetheless had to start on the ground floor just like everybody else.

Associate AD Debby Jennings, who today is all things Lady Vol media, talks about how it all began.

"A back story to our marketing efforts – before we had a marketing person, we were all marketing people. We would all talk to any group that would listen to us. Basically we told them to come see us one time (in any sport), and they'll be hooked.

"We started a BOOST-HER Club in 1977. We had a small army of people in the community getting the talk right. Neighbors would invite neighbors to the games. We started to schedule Sunday afternoon games (after church and lunch) before it was popular. We were a hit with senior citizens because we offered them a game in the afternoon – many of them were more comfortable driving in the daylight during the winter.

"We started selling season tickets in 1978-79. They were very affordable but had a value. UT employees could get them for half price. We had attractively priced group tickets and contacted every school and organization we could think of – churches, youth groups, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts. We would have a bunch of different credit union nights. It didn't cost us a thing to advertise because they put a ticket voucher in their monthly mailings.

"Utility companies did it, too. East Tennessee businesses would have their group nights, as well. Along with it would come free advertising in the newspaper and on TV. 'It's ALCOA night when Tennessee plays Georgia.' It was pretty competitive. Did Oak Ridge National Labs have more employee participation than company X this year?

"Beth Bass, now CEO of the WBCA, was the first grad assistant I brought in (1984) to help with advertising and marketing efforts, since it was housed in media relations at the time. By 1988, we had two GAs doing just marketing and tickets in preparation for the Women's Final Four in Knoxville in 1990.

"The whole time, we've never stopped talking about our Lady Vol teams. We've been successful attracting fans year after year, but we have never taken our foot off the gas. We still try to keep it affordable for young families and senior citizens. You can celebrate your birthday at a game. Smokey will deliver a cake and balloons to you and take a photo of your group.

"We still offer Sunday afternoon games, too. And for the last 10 years, the postgame radio show is live in our arena. Thousands stay in their seats to hear the player of the game. Then coach (Pat Summitt) comes out and does her postgame show and takes questions from the audience or folks who call in. They ask her anything and everything. She answers it all. "It takes a commitment from the athletics director on down – including especially the coach – to go out and do the work to get people to the games. Success at the gate or on the court is not an entitlement; it's a lot of hard work."

– Debby Jennings

RYAN MCKEE / NCAA PHOTOS

It's all about resources

If you were building a women's basketball marketing program from the ground up, what are the top three priorities you would demand?



Mary Pink

Iowa State Associate AD for Marketing

- A personable, energetic, enthusiastic coach who is well-liked in the community. You have to have a coach who is willing to do anything and everything to market the program.

- Have your players interact with your fan base.
- You need a commitment from the athletics department for women's basketball – not just financial

resources, but the AD selling the program along with the coach. They need to see the merits of a successful women's program at the university.



Megan Mosness

California Director of Game-Day Experience

- Grass-roots marketing. For example, out here in the Bay area, advertising is so expensive and it wouldn't get you anywhere, so it becomes more about the nitty-gritty of getting into every school, distributing fliers to kids at schools, contacting every AAU and high school coach, parks and rec programs, boys and girls clubs and direct-mail efforts.

- Be flexible with comps to get people in the arena who will return as paying customers because they've enjoyed the experience so much.
- Make it an incredible game-day environment from beginning to end.



Jimmy Delaney

Tennessee Director of Marketing

- I need everyone's full attention for the entire year. I need ticket office people, development, media relations, marketing – any day of the week, I need somebody who can be on board and ready to go if I need something for women's basketball.

- I need resources – even here we don't have a million-dollar budget. We try to do as much as we can with what we are provided.

- I need a coaching staff that is more than willing to not just focus on a task but to solicit corporate partners and talk to potential donors. Pat (Summitt) is one of the busiest people I've ever known, but she still goes to the Optimist Club or the Rotary luncheons to visit. She'll go to the dining hall to talk with students. The student who gets to meet Pat Summitt and have his or her picture taken will go back and say I'm going to the game and bring four or five of their floor mates with them. Before you know it, one person turns into 10.



Julie Hermann

Louisville Executive Senior Associate AD

- 10 billboards per year.
- Lots of ridiculous things to use as giveaways ...
- ... and for the local ladies society to adopt me so that my tentacles go much deeper!



Women's Game

continued from page 52

Even if women's basketball is not exactly like the men's game, it's not your grandmother's game anymore, either. And it's not just the dunks that are changing but the athletes themselves. There's more jersey popping, finger pointing, chest thumping, tongue wagging and other antics that weren't present in past years.

"The general women's fan is not used to a player pounding her chest after blocking a shot or hitting a crucial three-pointer," said Tennessee's marketing director Jimmy Delaney. "But if the player can back that kind of behavior up, there's a percentage of the fan base that really gets fired up by those gestures.

"As long as the players use that behavior in ways that fire up their teammates and the fans – as a catalyst for a rally – then it's OK, but if they do it to emulate the guys or to get on SportsCenter, then it's not positive for the women's game because there are so many fans who are purists."

The women's game even had its first case of "going pro early" recently when Rutgers' Epiphanny Prince skipped her senior season to play in Europe in route to a career in the WNBA, though the limited pay for professional players may prevent that from becoming a trend.

California's Mosness isn't worried about the showmanship, the dunking or even the tattoos – just yet. "We're getting an eclectic group of young female

"The beauty of women's basketball at the college level is that you're right there at the epitome of play with the ultimate of humanity – you're still interacting with approachable, real people."

– Rich Luker



From wearing jumpers ...

Minnesota professor Mary Jo Kane poses this scenario to her incoming students:

A woman and her husband are at the dinner table the night before Minnesota's unbeaten women's basketball team hosts also-unbeaten archrival Wisconsin. The game has significant NCAA tournament ramifications and is being televised nationally on ESPN. The woman says to her husband, "Let's go see that game." And the husband responds, "No, the players just aren't very pretty this year."

The students invariably snicker at the absurdity, but Kane said the "sex-sells" approach is no laughing matter.

"We have 30 years of data that show women in sport more likely to be portrayed off the court and in feminized and sexualized poses and narratives," said Kane, the director of Minnesota's Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport. "Female athletes often are portrayed not for their athletics competence but

instead how pretty or sexy they are."

But that may change, Kane said, once marketers realize sex doesn't always sell.

For example, she and Tucker Center affiliate Heather Maxwell provided focus groups with various images of women athletes – from former Tennessee basketball star Chamique Holdsclaw in action to Indy racer Danica Patrick in a provocative pose. The men in the group were interested in the "come hither" pictures, of course, but they wanted to see the pictures, not the sport the athlete represented, because they knew the woman wouldn't look the same in competition.

"Not only does the sex-sells approach not attract the male demographic you're after to actually buy a ticket and watch the games, but it also alienates the loyal fan base you have," Kane said.

But some marketers fear portraying women athletes as athletic. Nevada professor Jennifer Ring told Los Angeles Times writer Kurt Stretter

last spring that people are "phobic" of women athletes.

"We're afraid of women who are big, strong and effective at competition," Ring said. "This is especially true when it's about women athletes on teams – women focusing their effort on helping out their teammates, women doing whatever has to be done to help other women. (Instead of attracting a male audience), it conflicts with stereotypes we have about femininity."

Stretter in the same article wondered why men judge the credibility of the women's game by comparing it with men's basketball. He says the typical male fan will appreciate the dominance of Connecticut or Tennessee but rationalize (however incorrectly) that neither could beat a highly ranked

student-athletes out there now, which I think is great,” she said, at the same time noting that California coach Joanne Boyle doesn’t allow tattoos.

Boyle also might wish to ban dunks, too, once her Golden Bears face Baylor with incoming 6-foot-8-inch freshman Brittney Griner on November 22.

But Mosness thinks the highlight-reel dunker may be what ends up attracting the male demographic. “They’ll at least be very intrigued with her,” she said.

Which brings us back to how the athletes themselves are “marketed.” Today’s promotions rely more on players’ athleticism than the novelty of them being young women who happen to play basketball, as was the case three decades ago in the game’s infancy (*see related article, below*).

Kane cited that phenomenon as a fundamental shift in ESPN’s coverage, noting that the cable network focuses now more on on-court mental toughness and courage and how competent and skilled players are.

ESPN’s Jon Achar agreed, saying the game, the athleticism and the skill level speak for themselves. “We show the athletes playing, and that tells the story,” said ESPN’s vice president for creative services. “We don’t worry about either overselling the athleticism or the basketball ability – because it’s there.”

That athleticism appeals to women’s basketball’s original fan base – as long as the athletes displaying it don’t forget their roots. And that’s how they’re marketed at California.

“While our players are very athletic, we don’t market them as ‘hard core,’” Mosness said. “Our materials portray them either through action shots or stills in which they’re typically smiling.

“They’re portrayed as ‘having fun’ because, in the end, they are role models. Even though the game is changing, you can stick with what works from a marketing perspective, and you can create fans for the women’s game who aren’t fair-weather about it. They stick with you win or lose because they have a personal attachment to the game and to the players.”

Rich Luker, who created the ESPN Sports Poll in 1994 to study trends in how Americans relate to sports, said that’s precisely what the women’s game has going for it – the willingness of the players to be “real human beings” with fans who love the sport.

“The beauty of women’s basketball at the college level,” Luker said, “is that you’re right there at the epitome of play with the ultimate of humanity. You’re still interacting with approachable, real people.”

Luker’s advice, then, to women’s basketball’s leaders?

“The primary goal is not about being the biggest but about being the best,” he said. “There is only one biggest sport right now, and that’s the NFL. So when it comes to women’s basketball, you have to make sure that when people consume it, it’s the best they’ve had. Instead of spending all the energy to be bigger, focus on being better, so that when people choose to devote their precious time to spend with your product, they walk away with the finest experience they can.”

Maybe the answer to the riddle isn’t so complicated after all. ■

to shooting them

high school boys team – so, accordingly, the women’s game “isn’t worth watching.”

“Can’t we simply appreciate both games on their own merits, especially now, when women are shooting, dribbling and passing in monumentally skilled ways?” Streeter wrote. “If we’re comfortable with hailing the women’s champion at Wimbledon without shaking our heads at the fact she couldn’t beat Rafael Nadal, why can’t we do the same at the highest levels of a team game like basketball?”

Kane thinks the way college administrators market the women’s game will help. She and Jo Buisse co-authored a study of media guides that showed players evolving from wearing jumpers to shooting them.

Many schools in the early 1980s displayed the women’s team as “girls next door” in formal dresses or casual clothes. These days, though, more covers are graced by players in uniform and action.

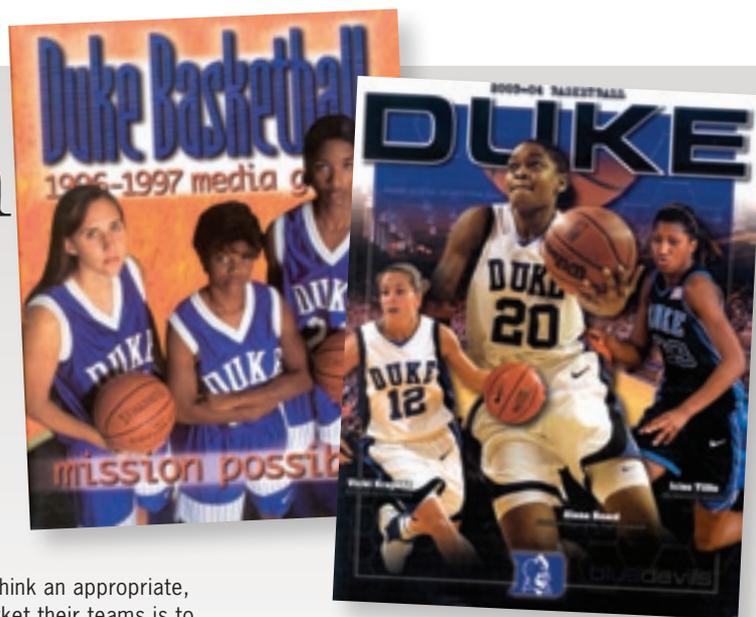
Kane thinks that reflects a shift in decision-

making at the administrative level.

“Apparently those who produced representations of sportswomen more recently believed that athletic competence was a very appealing and broad-based message,” she wrote in the study’s conclusion. “Unlike their predecessors, they may think an appropriate, even effective way to market their teams is to equate females with athletic competence.

“Across all six sport conferences we examined, there was clearly a dramatic departure from the typical (and unrelenting) mass media images that trivialize and marginalize female athletes and their accomplishments.”

– Gary Brown



Minnesota researcher Mary Jo Kane co-authored a study of media guides in which she found a progression of how women’s basketball players were portrayed on the cover. In looking at Duke, for example, players went from a more conservative image in 1988 to being marketed via action shots by 2003.