

SPORTS

The teams are okay, but the crowds..

Commentary by Bernard Poitras

As I sat back to watch the usual onslaught of Bowl games this past holiday season, I could not help but notice one glaringly obvious aspect about each game. Every stadium was, as they say, jam packed.

From a capacity crowd of 72,000 at the warm Orange Bowl to a generous crowd of 67,000 at the Cotton Bowl in Texas, where it was unseasonably cold, support was evident everywhere. Granted, most of the annual affairs were played in warmer climes but these large attendances only typify the kind of crowds that occur around each college in the US.

When the Washington Huskies, the Washington State Cougars or the Michigan Wolverines take to the field in October or November, they get crowds upwards of 30,000. The frenzied football fans do not seem to be deterred by the cold weather; in fact, they seem to thrive on it.

What do all these numbers and statements really mean? Well, for starters, the figures given above suggest a greater appreciation and support from college students and fans south of the 49th parallel compared to those here in the Great White North - but more specifically, here at the U of A.

The comparison between college crowds in the US and those at our own university runs into obvious and unavoidable complications. The prevailing ones are enrollment and weather. We cannot compete with UCLA or USC for attendance at a football game. Their stadiums are much larger - a 103,000 seat Rose Bowl for UCLA - their student body is much greater than ours and their climate is warmer. Realistically, though, we do not have to compete with a US college to see who would get a crowd. The problem here is getting any crowd. With an enrollment of around 23,000 students, you would expect at least a half, if not a third, of those students would go to cheer on the Bears football squad. Now that the team plays in the 25,000 seat Clarke Stadium, instead of the dwarf-sized Varsity Stadium, you would expect somewhat larger crowds than the 928 still faithful fans they did get. This past 1983 season saw the Bears play only four regular season games, and their largest crowd was 1350, against the Vanier Cup Champions, Calgary Dinosaurs. The Bears

Suppose they gave a basketball game, and nobody came?

also finished the season ranked No. 6 in the nation and were at one time ranked No. 5.

True, it was a sub-par season for the gridiron gladiators, but finishing No. 6 out of twenty three universities is certainly nothing to be ashamed of. Nor is it any way for those enrolled at the university to show their appreciation for the team.

This 'small crowd' epidemic has also spread to the basketball Bears, in the form of drawing a woeful average of 350 fans per game. Not too welcome a sight when on

this very campus there sits a spanking new multi-purpose gymnasium, the Universiade Pavilion - affectionately known as the Butterdome. This bright panelled structure has only managed to lure embarrassingly small crowds - 421 being the highest and 187 being the lowest - to watch its occupants play, as Coach Don Horwood would say, some round ball.

While the Bear hoopsters do not have a Ralph Sampson or an Akeem Olijuan roaming the front courts and slam dunking their way to victory, they nonetheless play

entertaining basketball. The lack of support cannot be attributed to Coach Horwood either. The first year mentor has done more than his part to attract the fans as is evident in his appearances - and lengthy at that - on a couple of local talkshows. Even the players themselves have helped their own cause by going out to local high schools and encouraging future U of A students to come to the games.

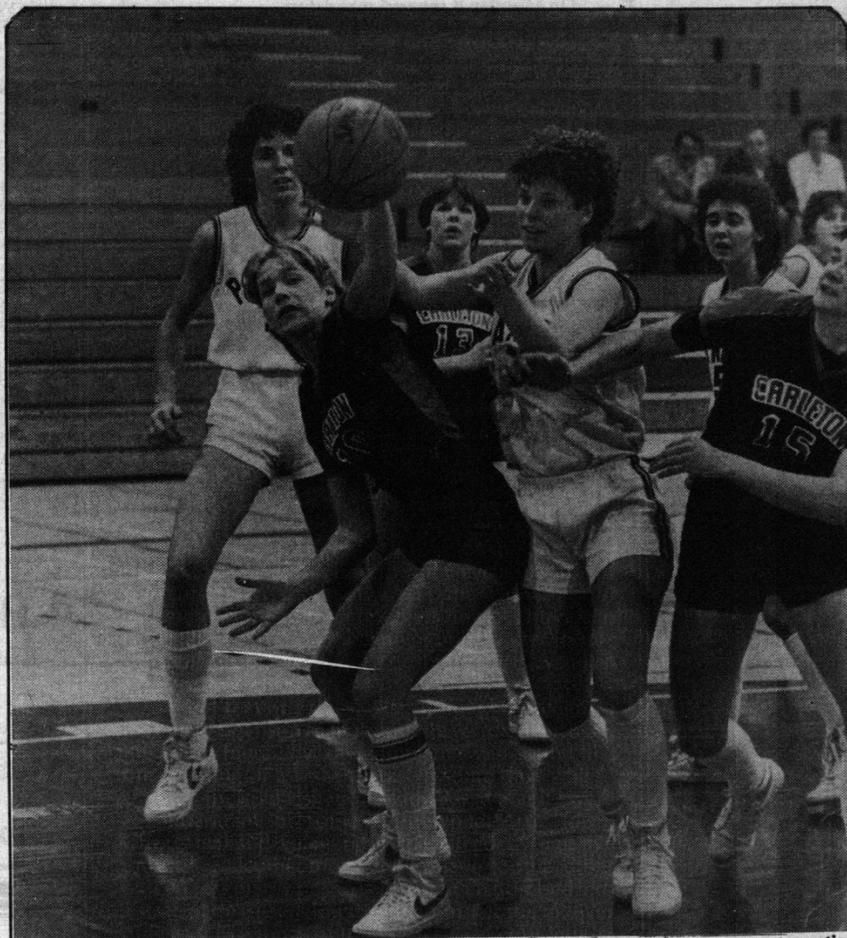
There has even been a top rate touring Brazilian squad that came to play in a tournament, which they easily won. Just over 400 spectators showed up to watch the Sirio Sports Club put on a great display of basketball and who, on their way up to tour Canada, beat some of the best teams in the NCAA.

Remember back, if you will, to the Universiade Games and the basketball semi-final between the US and Canada. If memory serves correctly, that game attracted over 11,000 fans and was sold out weeks in advance. The support seemed to be there, if not from the university students, at least from the public. But, the support has to come first and foremost from the university students themselves, and not from John Q. Public. Even with half of the Pavilion's stands taken out for other use, there are still a hefty 5,200 seats to be filled. Up till this point in the season, 4769 of those have not been filled.

The most disturbing and mind-boggling sport to figure out, in terms of attendance, is hockey. Not even the Reverend Jesse Jackson could save the hockey Bears from the terrible card that they have been dealt this past 83-84 season. No way, not even Remington Steele could figure out why a 9-2 hockey club, who are ranked No. 1 in the country (ahead of thirty five other teams) draws an average of 500 fans a game. There is no logical solution as to why the Bears draw so low in a hockey starved city like Edmonton. The arena - albeit small and older than most rinks - cannot be used as a scapegoat, because to the east of us, our rival U of Saskatchewan Huskies, draw capacity crowds everytime the green and white take to the ice.

Their rink, which resembles a farmer's barn more than an arena, only holds 800 people, but could probably hold more, were it not for the fire marshall. You cannot even use the usual excuse not to go to these games. It cuts into only three hours of studying; if anyone actually studies Friday and Saturday nights. As well, every hockey game is free if you show your student ID card.

The excitement of college sport, be it hockey or basketball, is unsurpassable. There are no sky-rocketing ticket prices, no contract hassles with the players, and no resentment about seeing your team lose. It is all fun for the fans, but for it also to be fun for the players there has to be fans and fan support.



The Pandas Basketball team, ranked No. 2 in the country, in a game last Sunday. As at most sporting events at the U of A, good seats were still, ahem, available.

Photo Bill Ingles

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Track and Field, page 12
Campus Recreation, page 14

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