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God reigns at sporting events

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. -- The throng of fans cheered, shouted enthusiastic "Amen's" and waved their arms above their heads to the tunes of a Christian rock band.

Nearly, children checked out the Bible-themed bobblehead dolls and posed with VeggieTales characters while parents scanned tables filled with Bibles in a family-friendly brand of pregame tailgating.

That scene before a recent Birmingham Steeldogs arenafootball2 game is one of a growing number of "Faith Nights" at sporting events around the country that mix religion and sports, praise and promotion.

"We want you to come to a game and have fun and listen to music," said Brent High, president of Third Coast Sports, which runs and promotes the events. "But at the same time, we're going to set the table for you with player testimonials and music. It's a great night for you to reach out to people who don't have a church home."

It's not a bad way for minor-league teams to coax a few extra fans through the gates, either. Nashville, Tenn.-based Third Coast has planned more than 60 events in 40-plus cities this year, even venturing into the major leagues for the first time. The Atlanta Braves have scheduled three Faith Nights this summer, and the Arizona Diamondbacks have one planned in August.

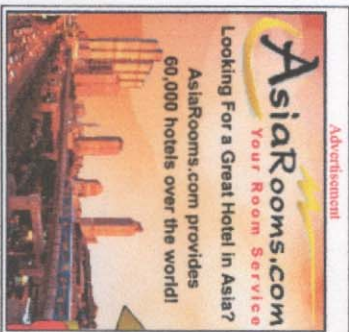
Mr. High said two NBA teams have expressed interest in similar events for next season. For churches, it's an opportunity for outreach. For teams, it's a chance to reach out to new fans.

"It'll be no different than any other group out there," said Derrick Hall, the Diamondbacks' executive vice president. "They will promote it at a much greater level than most groups can. As a result, we'll sell more tickets."

It worked for the Steeldogs, who have two more Faith Nights planned this season. The Friday night game drew 6,156 fans, nearly 1,000 more than the team's average draw for previous May games, Steeldogs General Manager Scott Myers said.

The Steeldogs had planned to outfit their players in Bible-themed jerseys -- with books of the Bible above the jersey number pointing to specific chapters -- but nixed that idea when the league threatened a \$25,000 fine if they changed uniforms.

Instead, they wore them during pregame warm-ups. The event featured a pregame concert with a testimonial offered by new University of Alabama at Birmingham basketball coach Mike Davis and booths set up outside the arena featuring Bibles and bobblehead dolls of



biblical characters such as Moses and Samuel.

"It wasn't anything very much in anyone's face or overly evangelical," Mr. Myers said. "It was an opportunity to do something unique and do something entertaining for our fans. Those who wanted to be involved could be involved as much as they wanted to. Those that did not could have avoided everything."

"The feedback we've received has all been positive," he said.

Count 12-year-old Daniel Morron Jr. among the supporters. The Birmingham youngster raved about the "awesome" concert -- before attending his first Steeldogs game with his father and a friend.

Sporting a T-shirt with a picture of the cross above the message "Jesus beat the devil with two sticks," Daniel wasn't just enamored with the music or the ballgame.

"I hope that there are some nonbelievers here and maybe they found Jesus tonight," he said. "That would be awesome if that happened. It was pretty powerful."

Mr. High started Faith Nights with the Nashville Sounds minor-league baseball team in 2002. He said the promotions have spread rapidly, with 334 church groups participating in 2002 and 775 last year. Staffers visit each city leading up to Faith Night, drumming up support from churches and religious groups.

Faith Nights aren't just sprouting up in the Bible Belt, either. The Arena Football League's Las Vegas Gladiators drew an estimated 2,000 fans who hadn't been to one of their games before, said ticket manager Mike Caroselli, even though the team had to move the game to noon on Palm Sunday. Many were presumably even more focused on God than Goddesses, the Gladiators' dance team.

Jenny Quinlan, pastor of First Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, wasn't surprised it was such a hit in Vegas.

"Just because 'Sin City' is how our city gets its income and its business, there's Christians here, too," said Ms. Quinlan, whose church brought about 15 people to the game.

She said the group included a 17-year-old who had stayed from the church and dropped out of school when his girlfriend got pregnant but was invited by a friend from the church.

"Sports is a huge part of our world," Ms. Quinlan said. "When you use those venues, it's kind of a backdoor ministry. You use sports to introduce people to Christ or bring them back into that relationship."

But Chap Clark, a professor of youth, family and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, is skeptical of the real impact Faith Nights have on non-Christians.

"I don't think it makes much of an impact at all, and I don't think there's much relationship between the sports and the event for most kids," Mr. Clark said. "It becomes a way to get the kind of people that wouldn't come to the sporting event. That's the marketing side of it."

"It's very similar to what amusement parks and theme parks have done for a long, long time. They had their Christian nights," he said.

UAB's Mr. Davis thinks having high-profile sports figures offer their personal testimonials can have a positive impact.

"A lot of times, people have a tendency to listen to whoever they look up to or admire, and the message is always right there in front of them all their lives," the former Indiana University coach said. "But whatever it takes to get through to them, I think is good."

Daniel Martin Sr. had no complaints as he walked toward the arena following the concert.

"That was awesome," he said, "and now we get to go watch some football."