

# Volleyball fervor

## Even before winning the Big 12 Championship, these Sun Devils drew thousands of passionate fans

By Scott Bordow, ASU News  
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**Editor's note:** This story was featured in the [\*fall 2025 issue of ASU Thrive\*](#).

As Mary Shroll thought back to that night, a wide smile crossed her face.

Oct. 29, 2024.

Arizona State University's women's volleyball team is hosting arch-rival University of Arizona at Desert Financial Arena.

The third set goes back and forth and back and forth, the decibel level increasing with every serve and volley. By the end of the set, which ASU wins 31-29, the season-high 4,630 fans in attendance have created an atmosphere unlike anything Shroll has ever experienced on a volleyball court.

"It was incredible," said Shroll, a graduate student on the 2024 team. "It was so loud it was hard to hear my teammates."

Head Coach JJ Van Niel is asked about that night. He, too, smiles.

"That was one of the coolest experiences I've ever been in," Niel said. "Our crowd was just popping. It was loud and uncomfortable (for U of A). Everyone was on their feet, screaming. It was exhilarating."

In the Dec. 29, 2022, press release announcing his hire, Van Niel said one of his goals was to connect with the volleyball community in the Valley.

"You have to build a winning program," Van Niel said. "And then you have to be aggressive in the market."

Do those things, Van Niel said, and fans will come.

On that October night, they did.

## Becoming champions

The transformation of ASU's volleyball program since Van Niel was hired has been, in a word, remarkable.

The Sun Devils finished 13-19 in 2022. In Van Niel's first year, ASU went 28-17 and advanced to the NCAA Tournament. Last year, ASU finished 30-3, won its first conference championship in team history in its first year in the Big 12 and Van Niel was named Big 12 Coach of the Year.

The 30 wins were the most of any ASU volleyball team this century, and the winning percentage of .909 was the best in team history.

Not coincidentally, ASU's average attendance has increased from under 2,000 in 2022 to more than 3,000 in 2024. Of the top 10 most attended games in team history, six were played last year.

Longtime Arizona sportswriter Jeff Metcalfe, who started covering ASU as a reporter in 1985 and devoted himself to the coverage of women's sports, said, "I can't think of any ASU team in any sport that's done something more surprising or more like a bolt out of the blue."

ASU Athletics Director Graham Rossini has called Van Niel one of the top coaches in the country.

"We win the Big 12 championship, and I'm getting phone calls from counterparts asking for permission to talk to him. I'm like, 'Absolutely not. We're keeping this guy.'"

Rossini also praised Van Niel for what he has done to connect with the local volleyball community. Van Niel already had made those connections during his time as an assistant coach at Utah and USC, but since coming to Tempe he has become a fixture at club volleyball gyms.

"The kids see him as the head coach of ASU, and it's an important signal that we value local talent," Rossini said. "He's very intentional about that."

Van Niel made those intentions clear shortly after getting the job. He hired former Chandler Hamilton High School volleyball star Preslie Anderson as an assistant coach in January 2023 and told Anderson she had two immediate goals: Double ASU's social media numbers and ensure the program is ingrained within the Valley volleyball scene.

Two years later, ASU's total followers on social media has increased from 35,000 to nearly 50,000, and Terri Spann, the director for AZ Storm Volleyball Club and a former Sun Devil Volleyball player (1994–1997), said ASU's coaches are a constant presence at her team's games and practices.

"ASU is pretty active about coming into our gym, and they're very good about approaching my coaches at club events and stuff like that," Spann said. "I didn't see that before. Now, with recruiting and the transfer portal, you never know when local kids will want to come back, so it's super important to stay connected, and ASU is doing that."

Anderson said the coaching staff often references the three words that have become a mantra for football coach Kenny Dillingham: Activate the Valley.

"In college athletics right now, there's a big push to getting your brand out there," Anderson said. "Our brand is global, but it's important for us to make sure that we're taking care of those in our backyard. That generates excitement, and that's how you get more people at our games."

The program's outreach occurs on several fronts and across generations.

Two examples:

Each summer ASU volleyball holds camps for more than 200 kids ranging from third grade to high school. The connection ASU makes with the younger kids is vital, Anderson said, because those are the kids who return to camp year after year; become Sun Devil fans — “It felt like we were rock stars at camp this year,” said junior blocker Ella Lomigora; and show up at games, screaming their heads off.

The team even has a Camper Night during the season where kids who wear their camp T-shirts receive free tickets and then can come on the floor after the match to interact with the players and, for 10 minutes or so, serve balls over the net.

“So, instead of being this idol that doesn’t talk to them, it almost feels like a friendly, familiar face,” Anderson said. “Those kids feel connected to our team.”

Second, the program created an Academics and Outreach Committee that is responsible for setting up community service events. In 2024, team members led by redshirt sophomore setter Brynn Covell spent several Monday nights having dinner with and getting to know the residents at Mirabella at ASU, the retirement community on the southeast corner of Mill Avenue and University Drive on the Tempe campus.

“We’d sit down, tell them about the team and what we’re doing,” Covell said. “It was really fun.”

Those get-togethers created new volleyball fans. Covell said that Mirabella residents attended several games during the 2024 season.

“There’s nothing more special than all the fans coming out and cheering on our athletes,” Van Niel said. “They want us to win, but at the end of the day, it’s the connection with the athletes that they’re so passionate about. Win or lose, they love our kids, and I just think it’s such an awesome feeling.”

## Looking forward

Van Niel has another number in mind as ASU gets ready for the 2025 season: 5,000. As in, averaging more than 5,000 fans per game, a number that would be unprecedented in program history.

“We want to be in the top five nationally when it comes to fan attendance, and I think we really have the ability to do that,” Anderson said.

A successful program. A consistent presence in the volleyball community. A sport, Rossini said, that is “electric and easy to watch.”

What’s not to like?

“It’s really exciting,” Van Niel said. “People that I’m close with will say they brought some friends to a game, and they had a blast. That’s volleyball. Go to one match, and you’re going to be hooked.”

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## Ready to join the excitement?

The volleyball season is underway.

View the schedule at [thesundevils.com/sports/volleyball/schedule](https://thesundevils.com/sports/volleyball/schedule).

Buy tickets, including season passes, at [am.ticketmaster.com/sundevils/buy?id=MTY3](https://am.ticketmaster.com/sundevils/buy?id=MTY3).

*Note: Home games are at Desert Financial Arena in Tempe. Those attending games can park in Lot 59 for free, which will be the free parking option all season.*

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



ASU's volleyball team won the Big 12 championship its first year in the conference. Photo by Peter Vander Stoep

## Text image(s)





Mary Shroll, who earned a Master of Science in business analytics in 2024 and who has since gone pro, makes a save last season. Photo by Peter Vander Stoep



ASU volleyball player Brynn Covell with a young fan named Brynn. Photo by Peter Vander Stoep