

Pitching in: ASU marketing students work with Sun Devil Athletics to draw crowds

Collaboration started with phone call from women's volleyball coach JJ Van Niel

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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When Arizona State University women's volleyball coach JJ Van Niel was an undergraduate business student at the University of Southern California, he got the opportunity to help a professor write code and build a currency trading system.

The real-life experience invigorated him.

"It was really fun, I learned a lot and totally bought in," Van Niel said. "It was actually real. There was skin in the game."

So when Van Niel sought to improve the marketing of the Sun Devils' volleyball program, he leaned on his past and reached out to Daniel McIntosh, faculty director of the sports business program in the W. P. Carey School of Business.

The result of their conversation: A collaboration in which students from three sports business capstone courses use real-world marketing strategies, without any funding, to impact attendance at both volleyball and baseball games.

In the spring 2026 semester, the students also will help market and promote gymnastic meets and women's basketball games.

"We think that this collaboration has worked out wonderfully," said Bill Kennedy, associate athletic director for student engagement. "The students get the benefit of practical experience in marketing

and game activations, and SDA gets the benefit of increased student attendance and the energy it brings to those games.”

McIntosh said he was blown away when Van Niel asked if the sports business students would want the opportunity to market the team’s games.

“It is an incredible statement of their trust in our program for them (Sun Devil Athletics) to turn over one of their marquee events with ASU volleyball,” McIntosh said. “This is a top-10 national program. And they turned over the keys to us? That is incredible trust. That is hard won.”

The first opportunity came in 2022, when the students helped market a volleyball match against the University of Kansas that drew 4,179 fans.

Then, last spring, the student attendance record for ASU baseball was broken in two consecutive games in part due to the marketing efforts of the students in the capstone courses.

Most recently, on Nov. 17, the marketing students played a role in the volleyball program drawing 7,703 fans — its biggest crowd in 12 years — to its win over the University of Arizona.

“It’s been a really cool thing,” Van Niel said. “We’ve had some really nice successes with them working with us.”

Of course, it helps that the volleyball team under Van Niel has won back-to-back Big 12 championships and was undefeated at home this season. It’s far easier to market a winning team than a team that is struggling.

Still, Van Niel acknowledged that the students’ marketing efforts have made a difference because they know their target audience: fellow students.

“At the end of the day, we’re trying to get a young crowd,” he said. “We’re trying to get more students, more young people to come in and create energy in that place. I think one of the beautiful things of working with students is that they don’t have preconceived notions.

“If I go to work for Intel for 10 years, I have this great experience, but my marketing knowledge is Intel. There’s not really much breadth, and there’s probably not much creativity. I think when you go outside that box, you get some really cool people thinking about creative things to do.”

Tournament players

The Arizona State University women’s volleyball team reached the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament before [losing to Creighton University on Thursday](#).

It was the second Sweet 16 appearance for the Sun Devils in three seasons under coach JJ Van Niel.

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Daniel McIntosh

W. P. Carey School of Business teaching professor

Frank Jee, a clinical associate professor of marketing in W. P. Carey and one of the professors of the capstone courses, said the collaboration began with the goal of putting more “butts in the seats.”

While that’s still the primary goal, students have expanded their participation to include things like a designing a student giveaway T-shirt. In addition, they work with Sun Devil Athletics ticketing staff to track engagement, giving them a real-time look at how their strategies perform.

“We try to make students think about all the concepts behind fan behavior and sports marketing,” Jee said. “They have to think about their target audience, the audience’s motivations and think about what would get them more excited to come to the game.”

Jee, Ryan Kota and Katie Reifurth, the three capstone courses professors, split the 100-plus students into teams, and each team pitches marketing ideas to Sun Devil Athletics leadership. Kennedy then chooses the team that will market an event.

For the ASU-UA volleyball game that drew 7,703 fans, six students that comprised the Inferno Aces team used social media and word-of-mouth advertising to promote the event. Each student reached out to specific organizations and clubs they were involved in to spread the word, promoted the game through the W. P. Carey School's Instagram account, and spread flyers around campus.

“Our main approach was just to try to get as many eyes on the game as possible,” said team member Josh Heggie, a senior majoring in sports business. “Who could we talk to and be like, ‘Hey, are you coming to the game?’ Kind of pushing that urgency in a sense.”

Another student group helped create an energetic atmosphere at a volleyball game by using the Kahoot online trivia platform. They asked questions of the crowd before the game began, and the students at the game won opportunities to get autographed volleyballs.

Student teams also have talked to senior communities around ASU, volleyball youth groups and had players on the volleyball team post their own QR codes and marketing flyers to share to their communities.

For an ASU baseball game, the marketing students partnered with a social media influencer on campus who has more than 15,000 followers.

Along the way, lessons have been learned. For example, pitching an event two weeks out is useless because most college students don’t plan that far out. Now, marketing efforts are focused on the day of or the day before the game.

“This is just pure grassroots marketing,” McIntosh said. “We have an army of students that are getting out there and raising awareness about these events.”

Kota said that as students see their marketing efforts succeed, it’s a “light-bulb moment.”

“A lot of our students say they want to work in sports,” Kota said. “So we’re trying to expose them to what working in sports actually looks like. Sometimes, that’s hard to do in the classroom. But I can sense from the conversations I have with the students that they’re like, ‘You know, I tried this, and I became a better salesman.’ It’s really neat to see those things.”

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

Main image



Students from three sports business capstone courses in the W. P. Carey School of Business have helped to promote ASU athletic events, including the Nov. 17 volleyball game against Arizona that drew 7,703 fans, the largest attendance in 12 years. Photo courtesy of Sun Devil Athletics