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Snider taking a leap of faith

'Faith Night' ready to go nationwide

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The man who brought Biblical bobbleheads to Greer Stadium is now seeking to spread the faith nationwide.

Spread the "Faith Night" might be a more accurate way of putting it.

In past years, Mike Snider, owner of Nashville-based Third Coast Sports, has concentrated his expertise on the Nashville Sounds baseball market, building Faith Nights here into the team's most successful promotion.

The events feature pre-game Christian rock concerts, testimony from spiritual leaders and athletes, and some type of giveaway — all directed toward the hundreds of area Christian church congregations that are specifically invited for the evening.

The Sounds averaged 9,800 fans during each of the five Faith Night events last season, about 3,800 more than the team drew for other home games.

So it should come as no surprise that Snider has decided to make the next logical step: He's taking his act on the road.

Third Coast Sports has scheduled a total of 30 Faith Nights at minor-league baseball games across the country this season. Most stops on the schedule are safely within the so-called "Bible Belt," but Faith Night will also reach into cities like Portland, Ore.; San Bernardino, Calif.; and Hagerstown, Md.

Snider realizes the concept could prove a more challenging sell in communities that aren't as predominantly Christian as the South, and that objections might be raised to the idea of using sporting events to deliver a strictly Christian message.

But he's convinced expansion will succeed.

That's why he's already looking toward broadening his sports base to minor league hockey, minor league basketball and Indy Racing League events in future seasons with the hope that national sponsors will want to jump on board.

"To me, the combination of music, baseball and faith is just a no-brainer," Snider said. "If it works right, then everybody ends up a winner."

"It's a great opportunity for teams because they're always looking to bring more people into the stadium. So it can build a church following for the team, and at the same time, it provides a safe place for churches to take kids and families to enjoy a nice outing."

Idea hits close to home

The Faith Night baseball promotion didn't originate in Nashville.

Snider recalls hearing about the concept at a Major League Baseball game in the late 1990s, then getting the Sounds interested in the years that followed.

He figured since he already owned and operated Third Coast Artist Agency, which manages Christian rock musicians, he had at least half the equation solved — a stable full of willing-and-able performers at the ready.

In Brent High, the Sounds' vice president of sales, Snider found a perfect working partner.

High had played baseball locally, served as a youth minister, worked for a company that created church Web sites and is currently a deacon at the Brentwood Hills Church of Christ.

In other words, he had hundreds of ties to the audience that Faith Nights planned to target.

"From the Sounds' perspective, there were about 3,000 Christian congregations within a two-hour drive of Nashville," High said, "so it seemed like a natural idea to reach out to that demographic."

The Sounds entered the Faith Night market with three such promotions in 2001 and upped the total to five the last couple of years — even giving away bobblehead figurines of Moses, Noah and Samson during three games last season.

This summer, the Sounds will sponsor eight Faith Nights that will include three new bobbleheads — Daniel and the lions, John the Baptist and Queen Esther.

"It's really become the cornerstone of what we do here with the Sounds," High said. "We've received overwhelming support from Middle Tennessee, and the corporate sponsorship has doubled every year. I think what we've done is to turn them into events that can accomplish the goals of the Sounds and of local churches.

"It's an opportunity for church-wide fellowship and an opportunity to be together. But it's also an outreach opportunity, a chance to introduce people to the church and to their congregation in an unthreatening environment."

A big hit with the fans

The Sounds' Faith Nights, and the bobblehead giveaways in particular, drew national attention last year. ESPN's Outside the Lines and ESPN2's Cold Pizza were just two of the media outlets that examined the concept.

While questions were raised as to whether promotions should be geared toward a potentially controversial topic like religion, High said the Sounds have received few complaints over the years.

He believes one of the reasons for the lack of negative feedback is that the pre-game concert and faith testimonials aren't actually held on the playing field at Greer, but behind the first-base stands.

"It's not like we've got people out there stepping on home plate and speaking," High said. "This was never intended as an in-your-face kind of promotion. It is an event that people can rally around if they want, but if people just want to attend the game, they can walk right through the tunnel, sit in the park and never even know what else is going on."

The positive reviews, as well as Snider's success in Nashville, prompted him to start looking for other interested suitors during the past offseason.

His pitch was an impressive one: Third Coast Sports would work at least three events for any interested city, provide a national recording artist to perform at all events and mount a well-oiled public relations campaign to sell the Faith Night evenings.

In addition, Snider had added the popular VeggieTales as sponsors, meaning kiddie favorites Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber would be entertaining during Faith Night games.

Snider signed deals with 11 minor league baseball franchises right away, turning away more than that many because he wanted to move cautiously.

"They really made it an easy decision for us," said Kurt Landes, general manager of the Class A Hagerstown (Md.) Suns. "They had the artists available and were willing to sell the tickets, so it was really very attractive — low-risk, high-reward for them and for us."

"We'd actually done a version of Faith Night for years and called it a Christian Youth Night, but we thought with their concept and broader name, we could reach out to all ages and draw more people."

Many of the cities Faith Night has expanded to this summer are similar to Nashville in religious demographics, places like Jackson, Tenn.; Birmingham, Ala.; Tulsa, Okla.; and Fort Worth, Texas.

But the concept will also be tested in markets considered more liberal, such as San Bernardino, Calif., and Portland, Ore.

"It might be a little different environment, but I still think that baseball and a Christian music concert seem like a great mix," said David Oldham, president and general manager of the Inland Empire 66ers in San Bernardino.

"There are a lot of big churches in our area. And when you talk about the VeggieTales, giveaways, music, a baseball game and more, you have probably half a dozen reasons why people would come out to the baseball game."

Taking cautious approach

Snider says his biggest challenge right now is making sure he doesn't try to get too big too fast.

"I could probably sign 50 teams if I wanted to, but I have to make sure the product stays consistent," he said. "We want to be the best because I know others will be trying to get in on this business."

Nonetheless, he's tentatively planning to introduce the Faith Night promotions to the IRL circuit, as well as at minor league hockey and basketball games in the coming months.

"We like to try to build through multiple events during a season, and we're usually looking for teams that can draw 6 or 7,000, but usually only average about 3,500 per game," Snider said.

"Sports like Arena Football or the NBA usually do pretty well attendance-wise, so they don't need a ton of help."

His hope is that the Faith Night promotions become big enough across the country that they start attracting national sponsors.

Snider figures the combination of the Christian faith, baseball and rock music just might make for a pretty tempting package.

"Once we get a couple of summers out of the way and prove we can do this on a national level, then I'd feel more comfortable taking it to a national sponsor," Snider said.

"But it's definitely growing. It's happening across the country just like it has in Nashville."