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Putting seats in the seats

Perception of MSU's attendance doesn't square with reality

By Brian Ojanpa
Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO — Perception: Attendance at Minnesota State revenue-sports events is disappointing in light of "all" those empty seats.

Reality: In light of the facts, empty seats shouldn't be grounds for despair.

"We're definitely looking to improve, but I wouldn't say we're disappointed with our numbers," MSU director of marketing and promotions Brian Gabel says.

MSU athletic director Kevin Buisman suggests that glass half-full/glass half-empty perspectives may be at play here.

"It's all relative," he says. "Others may be disappointed,



Pat Christman

Student fans, enthusiasm — and more of both — tie into the quest for upping sports-event attendance at Minnesota State, where fan support isn't as paltry as many might perceive.

but we're doing pretty well in comparison to our peers. We feel attendance is maybe flat in hockey, but growing in basketball and football.

"There's always room for improvement, so it's not so much disappointment as that we're less than satisfied."

The disappointment dynamic

stems from an MSU-commissioned study earlier this year that focused on ways to increase attendance for three men's sports in particular —

hockey, basketball and football.

The study also addressed reputed attendance shortcomings among alumni and students, and presented anecdotal findings that a portion of attendees rued seeing empty seats and a perceived lack of fan enthusiasm.

From this, many people parsed the study as a document spelling disappointment.

However:

■ Though hockey attendance has seemingly settled into plateau mode, it's instructive to note that MSU is in the 9th-largest market in the 10-team Western Collegiate Hockey Association. Yet in terms of the Mankato-market population base as related to attendance percentage, the school is fourth out 10 in the WCHA.

■ When the basketball team plays uncompetitive nonconference games against obscure foes, it shouldn't be surprising that attendance languishes. But conference-game attendance is

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another story, with MSU averaging about 3,500 fans per game last year.

Even with those gate-killer nonconference games, MSU basketball attendance last season ranked second in the North Central Conference, and 12th nationally. (MSU averaged about 1,000 fans fewer per game than Division II leader Virginia State).

■ Football averaged more than 4,000 fans this past season, the highest attendance at Blakeslee Stadium in 10 years.

All that said, increasing

attendance remains an ongoing goal, says Buisman, though he suggests that attendance figures may be near maximum, given the Mankato market size.

"If there is a desire to move the bar, so to speak, it will take some extraordinary effort," he says.

That effort balances upon two prongs: The teams' success — winning grows attendance — plus zealous marketing efforts to stir interest among peripheral fan groups — families, alumni and fans living beyond the immediate market.

"If we could find 1,000 more (basketball) fans from a 50-mile

radius, we'd be right where we want to be," says Gabel, who realizes that while winning is important to attendance gains, fans must be entertained and enticed in other ways as well.

Hence the free T-shirt promotions, designated youth days, men's haircut service during games, even halftime contests involving costumed mascots representing various businesses.

Attracting more MSU students to games has always been a stickler, but Gabel says he's buoyed by increases at basketball games last season, when 1,000 to 2,000 students attend-

ed conference games, compared to about 500 in past years.

Another upshot of the attendance study was the formation of a marketing group involving MSU officials and community leaders.

Buisman says university goals relating to attendance will be clarified in the next few weeks, when that group is expected to present its thoughts and recommendations.

Meantime, although those empty seats may beckon, in the larger scheme they're not to be confused with bleak attendance figures.