

BEHIND THE CURTAINS

A day in the life of the dedicated staff of the West Michigan Whitecaps

By Ben Chiswick

The bright ballpark lights flip on. The gates swing open. Thousands of eager fans pour into Fifth Third Ballpark, excitedly hurrying to find their favorite seat, grab a hot dog, or get their hands on a tall, frosty cold one.

As the game begins, the West Michigan Whitecaps jump out to an early lead. A young girl narrowly edges out Crash the River Rascal to win the infamous Crash Dash around the infield in the middle of the third inning. After the bottom of the sixth, the crowd roars in laughter as a local college student stumbles to the ground during the Dizzy Bat Race. The home team wraps up a narrow victory, at which point the night sky lights up with a breathtaking fireworks display to cap off the evening with one last memory. Fans head to the parking lot for the drive home, happily satisfied after spending a wonderful evening at the ballpark.

What many fans are unaware of, however, is the amount of preparation and legwork that goes on behind the scenes of a Minor League Baseball operation. The West Michigan Whitecaps have a dedicated staff that works year-round to ensure that a relaxing night at the ballpark for a family of four exceeds expectations and ends with a smile on every fan's face. Well, except for the tuckered out youngster asleep in the back seat of the car during the ride home...

"Most people don't realize that this is a full-time job," said Chad Sayen, the Whitecaps' Director of Ticket Sales. "A lot of people ask what we do during the off-season. For me, the busiest months of the year are actually October, November and December when we are putting everything together and planning our ticket offers for the next season."

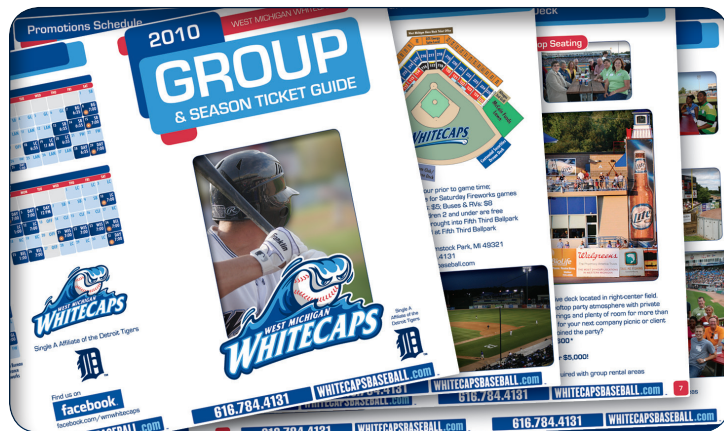
This may come as a surprise given the common misconception that there is nothing to do when the team is not playing home games. For most Whitecaps staffers, however, the off-season months of planning and preparation are equally as busy - if not more so - than the in-season focus of hosting baseball games.

"Everybody thinks that working in baseball is really glamorous, but it is a lot of hard work," added Alanna Klomp, who specializes in group sales and corporate events. "This is a special job that I really enjoy, but at the same time we put in a lot of hours and work hard just like any other office."

The West Michigan Whitecaps employ 33 full-time staff members that work at Fifth Third Ballpark year-round. These are the people responsible for coordinating marketing sponsorships, rolling out fan-friendly ticket offers, scheduling popular promotional acts, and keeping the organization active in improving the community -



The Whitecaps staff plans and executes events all year round like the corporate outing on a non-gameday pictured above.



Group tickets go on sale in November. That means a lot of planning begins immediately following the season.

whether there are games being played or not. They are also the key figures in overseeing a staff of seasonal and game day employees that grows to nearly 550 when the season is in full swing.

On a busy day in March, just three weeks before the 2010 home opener, Sayen finds himself in the ticket office putting together a pair of promotional offers to incentivize fans to pick up mini plan packages. With the sun shining during an unseasonably warm week, spring is an important time for the team to promote such offers as fans begin to think about baseball and even warmer days ahead. Sayen is also planning an outing for Whitecaps season ticket holders to attend a Detroit Tigers game against the New York Yankees in May, one of the numerous perks the team provides season ticket holders on an annual basis.

Across the office, Ernie McCallum stands in front of a large whiteboard filled with a color-coded chart. An Account Executive, McCallum is looking at a layout of the Whitecaps 2010 schedule from a sales perspective, complete with a listing of every home game the team will play this season and the giveaway item, sponsor, theme and promotion scheduled for that game. On this day, he is looking for luxury suite availability so that he can provide one of his clients with a few dates to choose from for their next night on the DTE Energy Suite Level.

McCallum's cubicle is across from Steve Dirksen, another Account Executive whose primary responsibility is to generate marketing partnerships with local businesses. Sponsorship and marketing relationships are a significant part of what allows a business like the Whitecaps to function financially. The Whitecaps annually draw between 350,000 and 400,000 fans and specialize in a family-oriented brand of entertainment that results in a lot of young families at the ballpark. As a result, marketing a business at Fifth Third Ballpark is an extremely effective way to promote products to families, especially those with children living in the household. On the flip side, the revenue generated from such marketing packages plays a significant role in allowing the team to cover their operating and promotional expenses.

The Whitecaps try to be very unique in providing marketing that offers more than just exposure on television or the radio. As a result, Dirksen and the rest of the sales staff are encouraged to think "outside the box" to give their clients something memorable and special.

"We have a lot of fun trying to come up with different ways for our partners to cut through the clutter," explained Dirksen. "It's fun coming up with the type of ideas that make somebody's ad stand out. When that excitement transfers to the client, I get excited. It's a win-win for everybody."

One of the most visible examples sits next to the scoreboard behind the left-center field wall at Fifth Third Ballpark, where Penning Plumbing, Heating & Cooling has an advertisement. Instead of a more typical sign on the outfield wall, Dirksen and the owners of the company came up with the attention-getting idea to build a giant plunger. In addition to its unusual shape, the mechanical sign also moves up and down to further draw the attention of fans in the seating bowl.

Then, Facility Maintenance Manager John Passarelli added another twist as he was building the plunger. What if it could shoot out water? Dirksen and his clients loved the idea, and now the giant plunger that moves up and down and shoots off water is a fixture at Fifth Third Ballpark.

Anna Peterson strolls through the office on her way to the fax machine. The Whitecaps' Community Relations Coordinator is sending a fax to the Detroit Tigers' spring training facility in Lakeland, Florida. Part of her job is coordinating the Keep-A-Cap program, in which the Whitecaps match incoming players with host families to provide residence during their stay in Grand Rapids. Participating families fill out detailed profiles that include information regarding their daily schedule, dietary habits, pets and other house rules.

A packet of these profiles is being sent to Lakeland, and when the Whitecaps roster is finalized at the end of spring training each of the players will get a copy. They will then be able to contact the host family they feel is the best fit for their lifestyle.

Once the season begins, Peterson will spend quite a bit of time with the players and mascot on appearances throughout the community. One of her primary responsibilities is coordinating the Whitecaps involvement in community projects to enhance the team's impact in the West Michigan region. The Whitecaps generally make appearances throughout the Grand Rapids area every morning that the team is in town. This may involve anything from players visiting a school to the mascot appearing at the hospital. In March, Peterson



The Penning Plumbing, Heating and Cooling Plunger has become a fixture at Fifth Third Ballpark.

arranged for a group of front office staff members to participate in a Habitat for Humanity project to build a house for a low-income family of six.

"I love it," said Peterson. "One of the things that drew me into sports as a business is the impact on the community. Grand Rapids is a great place and the people here love and look up to the Whitecaps. It can also be an eye-opening experience to see what is going on around the community beyond the world of sports."

In a nearby bank of cubicles, Director of Marketing and Media Relations Mickey Graham sits across from Promotions and Multi-Media Manager Brian Oropallo.

Graham is putting out a promotion geared towards increasing the Whitecaps' presence in the quickly growing world of social media. After he places posters around Grand Rapids, fans will have the chance to win free tickets by taking a picture of the poster and sending it to the Whitecaps through Facebook, Twitter or email.

"Social media is another avenue of conversation with our fans," said Graham. "People post questions on our Facebook page and we can communicate with them. We update things that are new with the team in terms of promotions and ballpark events. Social media has exploded in the last few years and it's a great way to reach people where they are."

Oropallo, meanwhile, is working on the "The Wave," the game day program that is updated each homestand and made available to fans at no cost. Hanging above his desk is a tongue-in-cheek sign with a picture of a spider spinning a web. It reads: "Webby the spider says, 'Always think about the website.'" The sign was created years ago when the website became an integral part of the team's marketing push, but it continues to hang close by because the words continue to ring true.

"I think a lot of fans would be surprised to learn how quickly we begin planning for next season," commented Oropallo. "Group tickets go on sale in November for the next year, just two months after the previous season ends. By that point, we generally already have game times, a basic promotional schedule and fireworks nights scheduled so we can have a promotional list and send out group brochures."

Like many members of the Whitecaps front office staff, Oropallo's job description changes dramatically based on the time of the year. While he spends the bulk of the off-season focusing on graphic design for marketing pieces, his in-season responsibilities include oversight of the in-game entertainment from the public address booth. The in-game promotions run seamlessly when viewed from the stands, but tying all the pieces together often creates a much busier picture behind the scenes.

"The most chaotic parts of the on-field presentation are the pre-game activities because there are a lot of participants and elements to coordinate," he explained. "On any given night we might have 10-15 first pitches, a National Anthem singer and a group of Baseball Buddies down on the field waiting for their opportunity to get involved. The timing of it all is pretty rigid because the game needs to start on time."

There are a lot of moving parts to the in-game entertainment when the on-field activity is combined with the audio from the Public Address and the visuals played on the video board, but a successful night for Oropallo and his staff means that the presentation appears clean and easy to the fans in the seats.

And as fans leave the parking lot at Fifth Third Ballpark at the end of a game, the staff wraps up a long day at the office. The concession stands close their registers. The ticket office recaps a busy night. The production crew reflects on what went well and what can be done differently. The groundskeeper begins preparing the field for the next day's game. The operations staff turns off the lights and locks the doors.

And tomorrow, they will do it all over again. ●



The community relations department makes appearances with Crash throughout the year.



Promotions, like 70s Night, are planned in the fall for the upcoming season. Participation from the staff makes these theme nights fan favorites.