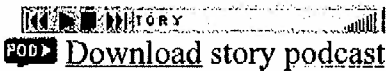




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New group to raise money and fan base for UCR's athletics program



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By ELAINE REGUS
The Press-Enterprise

UC Riverside has created a new organization to raise money and cultivate fans for the university's Division I athletics program.

The Highlander Athletics Association will be charged with building relationships in the community and then raising funds for scholarships and sports facilities.

"We can't expect people who don't know about us to be excited about us," said Julie Hall, associate director of athletics for development.

With a few notable exceptions, UCR's athletics program has struggled since joining the Division I Big West Conference six years ago where they compete against: UC Davis; UC Irvine; UC Santa Barbara; University of the Pacific in Stockton; Cal Poly San Luis Obispo; Cal State Fullerton; Cal State Northridge and Cal State Long Beach.

Even UCR's championship teams have had trouble attracting a following.

Men's baseball, which won the 2007 conference championship and tied for third last season, averaged 286 fans at home games while games on their opponent's home field drew an average of 1,068 fans.

Women's basketball, which was defeated in the semifinal round last year after winning two straight conference championships, brings in 284 fans, which is less than one-third the crowd at an away game.

Decent facilities are crucial to attracting top athletes, building a competitive sports program and building a following among students and the community.

Rob Halvaks, senior association commissioner for the Big West Conference, said, "Facilities become a resource for coaches to recruit student athletes and they also become an asset for fans to enjoy the event."

UCR's best sports venues are the soccer fields that were resurfaced a year ago and a new scoreboard

added, Hall said. The baseball complex comes next.

The greatest need in terms of facilities are basketball and volleyball, because they share a gym, and track and field because of the number of students on those teams and the poor condition of the university's track, Hall said.

Amy Harrison, CEO of Altus, a consulting and management company, will chair the association's board and executive committee, which reads like a who's who of the Inland region. Members include: Virginia Blumenthal, president of Blumenthal Law Offices; Jim Erickson, president of the Community Foundation; Jim Robinson, CEO of Security Bank; and Cindy Roth, president of the Greater Riverside Chambers of Commerce.

Harrison said the administration's support for athletics in the past five or six years has been way below average for comparable schools.

The gymnasium and locker room are the same ones Harrison used when she lettered in five sports almost 40 years ago.

There's no home-court advantage when the basketball teams have to practice in the old gym and then compete in the student recreation center, Harrison said.

That should change under Timothy White, UCR's new chancellor, who is committed to supporting athletics like never before, Harrison said.

The university hired a new assistant athletic director for marketing who will be responsible for game promotions and marketing and for providing a fun and friendly game-day experience for fans. A new assistant athletic director for operations will handle upkeep of the facilities.

A strategic planning group met for the first time last week and hopes to have a plan on White's desk by January.

"We want to be a point of pride for our community," Hall said.

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