

Christians invited to have a Blast

Robin Hale Eichelberger was looking for some converts March 12.

As the merchandising manager for the Baltimore Blast, she seeks ways to bring new fans to the Major Indoor Soccer League team. Although the Blast is the most successful franchise in the Baltimore market, it is always fighting for attention. The more high profile Orioles and Ravens draw enviable ticket buyers and media coverage.

A little more than ten years ago, team officials talked about how to change that.

"We were trying to expose what I think is a wonderful product," she said. "I think it's great entertainment, it's affordable entertainment and its family entertainment. I think it's awesome."

At the time, a Kansas City indoor soccer team had begun to successfully host Christian youth nights, which included a concert after the game. She felt it could work in Baltimore and went to work.

Nineteen concerts later, Christian Youth Night has become a staple of the Baltimore Blast season at 1st Mariner Arena. Two youth nights were held this season alone, with the latest coming March 12. The night brings a post-game concert with a rising star in the Christian music scene. Most recently it was rock band Hawk Nelson.

Hale Eichelberger said the events make a noticeable impact at 1st Mariner Arena.

"We played last Friday," she said March 12. "If we were to not have this crowd, we would be half of what it is in here. It is substantial. I wish it wasn't so hard to let people know what a wonderful product the blast are. We're always constantly selling and thinking of ways to get people in."

Church vans filled pulled into parking garages along Baltimore City's Howard Street hours before the team's game with the Rockford Rampage. Throughout the game itself, there were few signs of Christianity, outside of two non-Catholic schools performing God Bless America and the Star-Spangled Banner.

“We can’t take the time that’s a normal game time and throw in Christian aspects,” Hale Eichelberger said. “We just can’t, because you’ve got all your faithful fans, you’ve got a demographic of different faiths. Everything is status quo as a normal game, but as soon as (as the game ends) the music you’re going to hear during the changeover will be Christian music.”

She said any fan, no matter their faith, is invited to stay for the concert.

The Orioles host the Holy Name Society’s annual fundraiser at a game each year. This year’s contest- which will be played Aug. 6- will feature the national anthem sung by Father Michael W. Carrion, pastor of Immaculate Heart of Mary in Baynesville.

Monica Barlow, the Orioles’ director of public relations, said the team hosts a number of Catholic schools and churches through the “Flock” program, which is a discount ticket offer for religious groups.

The Blast’s Christian Youth Night offers tickets cut from \$19 to \$16 for any group that goes through Hale Eichelberger. She said groups of 10 will get one ticket free as well. The Blast donated \$1 from each ticket sold to Haiti through the Compassion International Relief Fund.

Hale Eichelberger said Christian Youth Night has become about more than just business.

“These events,” she said, “have helped me grow in my own faith.”