

HITTING THE HOMETOWNS

As SIDs, we spend a large chunk of our day-to-day efforts catering to our own local media, whether it's helping them with interviews, providing them with game notes or working with them on story ideas. And with good reason. After all, we see these folks regularly at our events and their coverage is at our fingertips every day. But often we neglect another very important — and often very fruitful — media group: our student-athletes' hometown outlets.

There are numerous ways to attack hometown coverage, and a few tricks I've learned along the way are listed below. Whatever methods you utilize, a successful hometown news campaign can reap plentiful rewards. For one, your admissions and alumni directors as well as your coaches will be thrilled that you have spread your university's name to other regions. As an SID, it helps you build relationships with a broader media array, which can only help you down the road. And, not that we should be spending much time thinking about them, but it will score some points with the parents.

Without further ado, here are some ideas for a successful hometown news campaign.

• **APPOINT A HOMETOWN NEWS MANAGER:** For your "regular" hometown news tasks, it is a good idea to appoint the job to an individual who will stay on top of it throughout the year. At Bucknell, we have a student worker whose primary office responsibility is maintaining our hometown database and providing weekly updates to hometown media.

• **BUILD A HOMETOWN MEDIA REFERENCE LIST:** At Bucknell, we have a three-ring binder that contains "Rolodex" information (i.e. address, phone number, fax number, e-mail) for the hometown papers of every student-athlete. We have it broken down alphabetically by sport, and it always proves to be a well-thumbed reference for us throughout the year. In order to ensure that we are sending releases to the correct spot, we ask every incoming freshman to list their hometown paper(s) on their bio questionnaire. ECAC-SIDA's wonderful Hometown Handbook is a great tool to help us keep our binder up to date.

• **BUILD OFF A BASIC WEEKLY HOMETOWN RELEASE:** It is a good idea to fax or e-mail a weekly, notebook-style hometown release for each in-season sport. A sample of the style we use at Bucknell is on the reverse side of this sheet. Our student writes and distributes this form every Monday. All additional press releases written by the staff, such as conference player of the week announcements, are also sent to the hometown papers.

• **MAKE SURE THE MEDIA KNOWS THEY HAVE AN ATHLETE AT YOUR SCHOOL:** At the beginning of each season, it's not a bad idea to send a quick note to a sports editor along the lines of, "Johnny Smith has made the varsity tennis roster at Eastern U and is the projected starter at No. 4 singles." Then provide them with your contact information and URLs for news and stats on your Web site, in case they are interested in following along throughout the season. Often, this is a better tactic than simply faxing them your 12-page season preview with the players' names scattered throughout.

• **KNOW THE AUDIENCE:** It's very helpful to know how specific papers handle their hometown reporting. Even the larger papers typically have a weekly notebook section. It's good to know when they run and who the contact is. Also, try to find out which media want to be included on your daily e-mail/fax distribution lists. Often these are the smaller papers, for whom it's a big deal to have a kid competing in college.

• **WHEN THE SITUATION WARRANTS, CALL!:** Every so often, an athlete turns in an especially noteworthy performance — a school record, a no-hitter, a conference championship performance in a sport

like swimming, track or golf. When something like this occurs, we try not to wait until the next weekly update comes out. Using our handy blue binder, we will call the sports desk directly and let them know what happened. Often, this will lead to a bigger story, which leads us to ...

• **KNOW WHEN TO GO FOR THE HOME RUN:** If a hometown media outlet has shown steady interest in an athlete, don't hesitate to pitch a full-blown feature story. Having an appealing angle is best, especially one that ties the athlete back to his or her hometown. For example, one of our distance runners at Bucknell just capped a great senior year by qualifying for the NCAAs. Turns out he has a younger brother in high school who is also a standout runner. That's a nice angle to pitch the local paper. We've also found that making these big pitches over the phone often works better than by e-mail or fax. There's no substitute for the human element.

• **ADVANCE OF TRAVEL:** A great time to pitch stories to a hometown outlet is prior to an athlete returning home to play a game. For example, early in the week of an away football game, check to see if any of your players are going back to his hometown. If so, tip off the beat writer that covers your opponent, especially if that player is doing well. By doing that, we've landed everything from advance feature stories to gameday sidebars to simple one-liners in a notebook piece.

• **(OCCASIONALLY) SWALLOW YOUR PRIDE:** From time to time we will get a call from a parent or high school coach wondering why nothing has been written in the local paper about their little Susie or Johnny. If you have tried to get info into their paper without success, it may be necessary to ask for their help. I have come across some papers that respond better to suggestions from their own subscribers than from college publicists.

• **BE PREPARED:** When pitching a story to a hometown paper, be ready for the follow-up requests, such as stats, records and especially photos. Also be ready to arrange for interviews with the athlete and coaches if necessary.

• **TRY TO DOCUMENT YOUR SUCCESS:** Perhaps the most difficult aspect of managing a hometown news program is tracking your successes and failures. Obviously, the information you are sending is traveling out of your reach, so how do you know if it is being printed? Following up with phone calls or e-mails is one way, and you should for the most noteworthy items. There are also clipping services as well as online search engines such as Google and Topix that can help you find mentions of your athletes.

Hopefully you will find some of these tips helpful. Good luck in your quest for hometown news success!