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Winning Combinations

Planning Kids Sports Camps With Celebrity Athletes BY MARCIA BRADFORD

Lending their time and talent, many current and former professional athletes run and participate in youth sports camps. For planners, these types of sports events require special attention to logistics and security, as well as community outreach. For the athletes, the camps offer a chance to give back to their communities and to inspire kids to excel in life skills as well as athletic pursuits.

But before and after the drills and practice sessions, the autographs and photos, there are the practicalities of turning the idea for a kids' sports camp into a reality. And that's where the myriad skills of sports events planners come into play.

"There are so many different elements that go into making a sports camp run smoothly," said Bethany Vietmeier, president and CEO of Ten Four Social, an event planning and social media marketing company which plans celebrity sports camps. "But many of the elements are the same as you would have for any other type of event."

She explained that her company helps the celebrity athletes with details such as marketing, registration, logistics and safety concerns.

Terri Grunduski, co-founder of the Grunduski Group, a Lawrenceville, Ga.-based organization that works with philanthropic organizations, agreed but pointed out two major differences; these events involve celebrity athletes and many of the children who participate are from underprivileged backgrounds.

"Security issues can be a larger concern than they are for some other events and reaching out to the children the athletes want to connect with can take a lot of time," she remarked. "Fortunately, there are lots of rewarding moments that more than compensate for any extra effort."

Making The Connection

For planners interested in celebrity sports camps, both Vietmeier and Grunduski recommended "working your contacts."

Ten Four Social already had a number of charitable foundations as clients when Vietmeier met Will Allen, a safety for the Pittsburgh Steelers, who also happened to be her neighbor. In 2008, Allen had started the Will Allen Foundation (WAF), as part of his endeavor to "pay it forward" and empower people to change their lives in a positive manner.

"Will had the idea to develop a program and provide resources for underprivileged children in a way that would inspire hope for them," Vietmeier said. "He had run some camps when he was playing for Ohio State (University) and wanted to do something similar as part of his foundation outreach."

For the past three years, Ten Four Social has helped provide the programming, marketing and other resources needed to operate the WAF Football Skills Enhancement Camp, which is "geared toward teaching the proper skills to become a better football player, as well as how to transfer those lessons and skills learned through sport into valuable strengths for life beyond the field." Since it was started, the camp has coached more than 620 kids ages 10-18. Along with Allen, the coaching staff for the event consists of current and former NFL and Ohio State University players.

Vietmeier also works with Sound Mind Sound Body football camps run by Jerome Bettis, former Pittsburgh Steelers' running back, Pro Football Hall of Famer and ESPN commentator. She related that her contacts with the Pittsburgh Steelers' staff, in particular the director of security,



Both Pittsburgh Steelers Safety Will Allen (left) and Atlanta Falcons Wide Receiver Devin Hester (right) are actively involved in camps that teach kids life skills as well as football techniques.

helped introduce her to Bettis, who had heard about the work her firm was doing with Allen and wanted to get involved in something similar.

“It’s critical that you build contacts and maintain relationships with people at all levels of an organization that you want to work with,” she advised.

Grunduski agreed. Her professional background, which includes working with the Atlanta Falcons, where she managed community relations for three years, helped provide the connections to her current sports celebrity clients. She started her own firm about three years ago and now works directly with athletes and their foundations. She assists with planning sports events for Kids & Pros, a youth football program founded in 2002 by former Atlanta Falcon Buddy Curry. With the help of his former Falcon teammate, Bobby Butler, along with current and former NFL players, Curry offers week-long camps that provide “hands-on-teaching of skill fundamentals, as well as instruction in the character values engendered by football that are the key to success on and off the football field.”

Additionally, Grunduski helps plan one-day clinics run by Devin Hester, a wide receiver/return specialist for the Falcons.

Tending To Details

For the most part, the youth sports camps that both Vietmeier and Grunduski plan are free to the participants, but outreach to sponsors, volunteers and the children the athletes are seeking to help is a large part of the planner’s task, said Grunduski.

“We work through the foundation to help find sponsors and we reach out to area schools as well as Boys & Girls Clubs to get kids involved,” she said. “These camps and clinics typically involve lots of kids -- we had more than 500 kids come to Devin Hester’s first clinic -- so we need to recruit lots of volunteers.”

She advised that registration often needs to be done well in advance. “I would suggest that you register camp participants at least three months ahead of the event, but with Buddy Curry’s camps, which have become annual events in many communities, we are already (in January) signing kids up

Why Celebrity Athletes Offer Sports Camps

“Sports camps are a way to help young kids learn about the sport of football and the positive things that come from playing the sport—learning about character values like teamwork, integrity, excellence, sportsmanship and perseverance,” said Buddy Curry, former Atlanta Falcons Linebacker and executive director of Kids & Pros. “They are a natural next step for a professional athlete who loves working with kids. If you love football, love working with kids, and coaching, it is a natural extension.”

He further pointed out that a lot of former players understand the platform they have and the opportunity to influence kids. “Kids look up to professional athletes, so getting involved and giving back gives the professional athlete a way to use the platform to help people, whether it’s in the athlete’s hometown, or in other areas.”

“Personally, through hosting Kids & Pros camps and clinics across the East Coast, I have the opportunity to impact coaches and parents who impact kids. I can share new ideas and new ways of looking at sports to help encourage more participation. I can help parents and coaches teach kids about LIFE through sports and show them that lesson (learning about life through sports) is more important than playing for championships.” ■



for this summer’s camps.”

Vietmeier said that the athletes are often able to find and reserve the facilities, but her firm is always involved in figuring out the layout to make sure all activities are accommodated and the flow of attendees is addressed. “If parents wish to attend, they are able to sit and watch, but many just drop off and pick up the kids,” she said.

“We help market the camps, largely through social media,” Vietmeier added. “We help with invitations and signage. We help bring in sponsors, assist with registration, make sure all the necessary waivers are filled out and the necessary insurance is in place. We make sure the timing is right for all parts of the program.”

Celebrity Concerns

Both Grunduski and Vietmeier asserted that the celebrity athletes who run these camps and clinics -- as well as the other celebrities they recruit to help out -- are very much involved in the events.

“Will (Allen) is totally involved and there for the entire process of all his foundation’s programs, including the sports camps,” Vietmeier said. “He has a director who runs

the foundation, but he is on hand and works with the kids at these camps. The same is true for Jerome Bettis.”

Grunduski pointed out that the athletes started these programs because they want to reach out to kids, especially those who would not otherwise have a chance to participate in high-profile youth sports camps.

“Not only are Buddy Curry and Devin Hester actively involved in their sports camps, they also ‘make the ask’ of other high-profile athletes,” she said. “My job is helping them by providing materials and supplying wording for text messages, emails and other social media they use in this effort.”

When it comes to autographs and photos, it’s important to set some ground rules, Vietmeier said. “We make it clear that there will be time for getting autographs and photos with the pros at the end of the camps or clinics and we rarely have a problem.”

Grunduski advised including instructions about this in the written materials. “We tell the kids that the athletes will provide signed photos at the end of the event and instruct them not to bring their own items in for autographs,” she said. ■