



Louisville Women's Basketball Corridor

WOMEN'S ATHLETICS FACILITIES AND THE ARMS RACE: THE ADDED IMPETUS FOR UPGRADES

by TaRonda Randall

It is about the experience, not the cost," said NCAA Director of Inclusion Amy Wilson, when asked to summarize her thought on Title IX and its impact on women's facilities. This June, Title IX will celebrate its 44th anniversary. Many impactful years have passed, as women's athletics continue to experience growth in popularity.

In fact, women's athletics has become so popular it seems an impetus beyond Title IX has been added to prompt institutions to revamp and redesign women's facilities - the arms race.

The arms race, described as perpetual in nature, has reached women's athletics, as universities are beginning to allocate even more resources to enhancing women's athletic facilities. In light of the numerous recruiting restrictions to ensure competitive equity and opportunity, facilities seem to provide institutions a chance to gain a competitive edge in terms of recruiting. After all, the NCAA membership has not imposed regulations regarding spending on facilities; thus, institutions are free to spend on constructing and/or enhancing as their respective budgets allow, in hopes of attracting the biggest and brightest talent.

For most athletics departments, commitment to women's athletics and a world class experience for all student-athletes is evidenced in their overall strategic plan, as well as facilities master plan. However, effective and committed leadership must be in place in order to give true meaning to mere written words. "You have to have an athletics director that understands," explained Lindy Roberts-Ivy, senior associate athletics director/senior woman administrator at the University of Oklahoma.

"That understanding will trickle down to the sport administrators. Fortunately, Joe (NACDA Past President, Castiglione), our athletics director, gets it. For us, it is all about asking the right questions of our coaches and finding out what they need to be successful."

Roberts-Ivy discussed being receptive of the individualized needs of various programs, as the right questions do not always yield identical answers. For example, Oklahoma's baseball and softball programs are both receiving upgrades to their fields. However, the upgrades are not merely duplicative, but responsive to the wishes of the particular coaches. While baseball elected to go with a turf field, softball got a new outfield and decided to put turf only on the backstop area. The softball program has also upgraded its drainage systems and has opted for wrought iron fencing to replace the chain link fencing that has surrounded Marita Hynes Field at the OU Softball Complex. The upgrades were termed as "pretty aggressive" and will be ready for the 2016 softball season. Facility upgrades, such as these, are a "constant and continuous effort" in today's arms race as described by Roberts-Ivy.

Increased television coverage for women's sports has helped fuel the said constant and continuous effort, simultaneously providing both a unique opportunity and pressure to showcase top of the line facilities. After all, last year's Women's College World Series attracted a record viewership that surpassed the viewership of baseball's College World Series. Coach Kelly Inouye-Perez of UCLA could not say enough about what the increased television coverage has done for the growth of softball.

Inouye-Perez has had the unique opportunity to be a part of one of the most storied softball programs in several capacities - as a student-athlete, an assistant coach, and now as the head coach. Over time, she has witnessed and been a part of several historical moments for UCLA softball.

“Our history has always been a part of our clubhouse,” she explained. Now, interactive touchscreens and graphics that are organized by decade and celebrate the accolades of current and former Bruins share the rich history and accomplishments with visitors to Easton Stadium. When asked about the most impressive part of the recent upgrades, Inouye-Perez spoke of how they were able to highlight what former Bruins are now doing. “We are just as proud of our success beyond the white lines as we are proud of our success on the field,” she said. In addition, UCLA softball has a new video score board that will be a part of this year’s season at Easton Stadium, which hosts sellout crowds and whose outfield fence already boasts several championship banners.

Showcasing a program’s success and communicating commitment appear to also serve as catalysts for upgrading women’s facilities.

“Women’s athletics facilities say a lot about priorities. They help express what the leadership’s expectations are for a program,” said Adrienne Johnson, the executive director for player relations for University of Louisville’s women’s basketball program. As part of Johnson’s responsibilities, she assists with on campus-recruiting for the Cardinals. When asked to explain the impact that facilities have on recruiting, she described the impact as “tremendous.”

Louisville’s recent upgrades to its women’s basketball facilities came in the form of enhancing the long corridor outside of the women’s locker room and players’ lounge that leads to the practice gym. “The hallway is below ground, and before, it truly felt like a basement,” Johnson said. Now, the 280-foot corridor has been branded and enhanced to showcase the success of the program. Johnson went on to explain the added benefit of being able to showcase the history and achievements of a program.

“During a recruiting visit, there is often so much to cover,” she stated as she went on to speak about how their recent enhancements allow them to silently echo the achievements of the program that have often already been communicated verbally to prospects during the recruiting process. “When recruits and parents enter the hallway, they have an opportunity to read about and see everything that our program has accomplished. Not only do recruits and their parents take everything in, other current student-athletes do as well.”

Johnson went on to add that facility upgrades make “the current student-athletes feel taken care of and show that the department cares.”

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Louisville Softball Field



UCLA Softball Timeline

Jessica Leger, associate director of athletics for academics and compliance/senior woman administrator for University of Louisiana at Lafayette, provided additional context for the effect that facilities have on the recruiting process:

“Prospective student-athletes take into consideration the facilities/amenities provided at different institutions, and continually compare one to the other. It seems that recruits see facilities as the administration’s

show of support for a particular sport. We know recruiting is continuously evolving and we cannot hang our hats on facilities alone. Ragin’ Cajuns pride ourselves on tradition, specifically the tradition of success. We believe that our commitment and dedication to the entire student-athlete experience is what sets us apart from our peers. The arms race will never allow us to remain stagnant when it comes to improving and upgrading facilities, but it’s the personal touch that makes us unique.”

The Ragin' Cajuns unveiled a facilities master plan in the spring of 2013 that was geared at improving and upgrading facilities with a personal touch. Prior to the release of that facilities master plan, a state-of-the-art softball stadium was constructed. However, there was one addition to that stadium that could not be completed during the initial phase of construction - an indoor hitting facility. Dr. Leger, also a former softball student-athlete for the Ragin' Cajuns, was proud to announce that the foundation for softball's indoor facility has been poured and the project is scheduled to be completed within the next three months. The new facility is slated to have an entire infield along with seven moveable batting cages, two pitching lanes, and video analysis capabilities relying on technology that is cutting edge.

John Roberson, CEO of Advent, an experiential branding firm based in Nashville, alluded to the increasing role that technology is playing in the arms race for facilities. "Millennials are used to being impressed," he stated. "They are accustomed to having great resources and technology at their fingertips." Roberson and Advent have approached recent projects with technology use in mind, aiming to produce unique moments that are worthy of sharing on social media platforms by fans and millennial prospects alike.

space, a video room, and coaches' offices. The intent behind this project is to further expand space for other women's sports teams that are currently located in the same area," they disclosed.

When asked what helps impact the decisions of the department, several questions were described that influence decision-making.

"At Maryland, our decision making is guided by five guideposts:

- What do we stand for?*
- What are our key values?*
- What business are we in?*
- What do we have passion for?*
- What will success look like?*

Certainly, showcasing our facilities is an important component of the recruiting process and in the context of these guideposts, we continually assess capital improvement planning in the context of sound stewardship, university alignment, equity, safety, competitive excellence, and student-athlete and fan experience."



Maryland Women's Basketball Offices

"Showcasing our facilities is an important component of the recruiting process"

Maryland's recently branded and renovated women's basketball locker room certainly appeals to the 21st century student-athlete. The space has expanded locker room and meeting space and also features a computer work space for student-athletes.

The Terrapins' Lori Ebihara, senior associate athletics director/senior woman administrator/chief of staff, and Joshua Kaplan, associate athletics director for facilities, operations, and events, shared that the department has other plans coming down the pipeline that are also geared toward its women's facilities.

"Similarly, we are exploring plans that involve an inclusive environment for the women's volleyball program. This capital improvement project includes a facility that houses expansive meeting and locker room

It was further explained that at Maryland, "the role that facilities play in recruiting goes beyond the brick and mortar. A key priority for our athletics department is to provide an unforgettable experience for our prospective student-athletes, current student-athletes, their families, and our fans."

In essence, the notion of providing an unforgettable experience in regards to facilities is becoming more and more prevalent in regards to women's athletics. And yes, the federal legislation known as Title IX is very much still in effect and serving as a driving force behind the upgrading of the spaces that women student-athletes call home. However, the increasing numbers of recent upgrades and branding efforts to women's facilities prompt the thought that perhaps the arms race for talent has reached women's athletics, serving as an added impetus for upgrades and allowing institutions an additional means of distinguishing themselves from competition. ■