

Mariners pin hopes on personalities to stem recent slump in ticket sales

The Seattle Mariners are hoping to score a little magic with 20,000 strips of fake hair.

The tufts of synthetic facial hair -- to be given away as a Safeco Field promotion on April 12 -- will simulate the "soul patch" on the chin of a popular flame-thrower in the Mariners' bullpen. But J.J. Putz Soul Patch Night also symbolizes a key piece of the Mariners' strategy this winter to rekindle interest in a team that has struggled to lure fans to the ballpark in recent seasons.

Home attendance in 2007 was down by about 900,000 compared with the record-setting 2002 season, which drew 3.5 million people to Safeco. Season-ticket sales plummeted during the same period, as the team went from a contender to an also-ran.

But the Mariners' organization feels optimistic on the eve of the 2008 season, opening March 31. The team says it has a bankable group of marquee players and emerging stars around whom to build marketing and advertising. Those players include Ichiro Suzuki and Putz, a towering pitcher known for the wide swath of reddish facial hair below his lower lip. Thanks to Putz and his teammates, the Mariners were in the playoff hunt in 2007 and finished with their first winning record in four years.

"We're really just trying to build on the good feeling that persisted during the majority of the season," said Kevin Martinez, the Mariners' vice president of marketing.

Among the new marketing initiatives is to place billboards and other advertising in the Portland area, to tap into a growing interest in the Mariners there. Back at the ballpark, the team hopes to build on last year's series of "microevents" that offered ticket discounts for niche groups such as Boy Scouts, firefighters and knitters. This season, for example, the Mariners are planning a group discount day for postal workers.

Fans at Safeco also can expect a new series of bobblehead dolls, free T-shirts and other giveaways, along with a series of discount nights for families and military personnel.

The 2007 season did see an uptick in attendance, with the Mariners drawing an average of 32,992 fans at Safeco, up from 30,626 in 2006. But the 2007 total was still 25 percent lower than in the peak year of 2002, the year after Ichiro came aboard and the team won a Major League Baseball record-tying 116 games.

The team also has seen a dramatic decline in full-season-equivalent sales, which are calculated by factoring full season ticket holders along with various partial season ticket plans. From a peak of 23,608 in 2002, the Mariners in 2007 had only

13,838 full season-equivalent sales -- a 41 percent decline. Add to the marketing challenge the baseball steroids scandal, which has played out during the off-season and threatens to cast its shadow over the start of the new season.

In a strange way, though, the steroids scandal helps Major League Baseball, said Andrew Zimbalist, an economist and professor at Smith College who tracks sports business. As long as fans don't think that the league is covering up the issue, he said, the game benefits from the publicity.

Meanwhile, Seattle's attendance has been in a slide. But it's cyclical, Zimbalist said. In 2001 and 2002, the Mariners were winning with a lineup that included popular veterans such as Edgar Martinez. And there was still a buzz about the newness of Safeco Field, which opened during the 1999 season.

The spectators will return, Zimbalist said, if the new crop of Mariners players continues to capture the attention of the fans and the team has more success winning.

The best strategy to attract and retain fans is to focus on the players, said Jill Wiggins, director of marketing and communications for Fox Sports Network Northwest.

"When the fans connect with players on an emotional level, when they feel like they know the player on a personal level, that resonates through wins and losses," Wiggins said.

The Mariners have had a loyal television audience throughout the Pacific Northwest, Idaho, Montana and Alaska. During the 2007 season, Mariners games broadcast on Fox Sports Network Northwest grabbed the highest average prime-time ratings among all broadcast and cable shows in the Seattle TV market. Mariners telecasts averaged a 9.0 rating, which translates to 9 percent of the television households in the greater Seattle area.

On opening day at Safeco Field, on March 31, a lot of the Mariners' -- and fans' -- hopes are riding on the backs of its popular players like Ichiro and Putz.

Hence, the delight -- mixed with stress -- that befell The Compleat Co., a Seattle business charged with developing a believable J.J. Putz soul patch for the April 12 fan giveaway.

The project has been fun, as well as challenging, said Glenn Leimbacher, vice president of the Seattle company specializing in promotional merchandise.

The team already had a durable, skin-friendly adhesive. But it took some doing getting just the right shade of red to make the fake facial hair look authentic.

After poring over many photographs, and with input from the team and Putz himself, Compleat settled on the color and



Photo: Stephen Brashear
Compleat Co. President/CEO Matthew Mason, left, and Vice President Glenn Leimbacher try on faux "soul patches" like those to be given out at the ballpark to honor Mariner pitcher J.J. Putz.

texture. Then the company had to search for the right manufacturer, finally selecting an overseas factory that makes fake mustaches for circus performers.

Compleat has worked with the ball club for years and also is behind other Mariners' promotions, including hats and T-shirts, as well as the collectible armed forces coin, the Mariners train car set and the hydroplane set. Leimbacher said he's in a unique position to root for the Mariners as both a baseball fan and as someone who does business with the team.

Last year, with Putz as the closer, Leimbacher said he felt the Mariners were one pitcher away from being a contender. And with the recent acquisition of Baltimore Orioles ace Erik Bedard, Leimbacher said he's looking forward to a good season.

"More wins for them," he said, "mean more opportunities for us."

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