

# STREET & SMITH'S SportsBusiness JOURNAL

## Other News

### Suns welcome kids to the jungle

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Published December 26, 2005 : Page 06

America West Arena general manager Paige Peterson speaks from experience when he says the NBA facility's Verizon Wireless Jungle tops the agenda for hundreds of Phoenix youngsters attending Suns games.

"Once you get your kids in there, it's hard to get them out," said Peterson, father of 4- and 6-year-old boys who are frequent visitors to the new playground in the arena's upper deck. "They're always saying, 'Let's go to the jungle.'"

The 10,000-square-foot attraction, which takes its theme from the Suns' popular Gorilla mascot, encompasses 6,000 square feet of climbing attractions, games and concessions, and 4,000 square feet of themed food and retail stands on the upper concourse leading to the play area.

The Suns and the city of Phoenix shared the cost of initially funding the \$1 million project, an expense Verizon Wireless ultimately pays for through its three-year naming-rights deal, Peterson said. The Suns would not disclose the financial terms.



Verizon's investment allows the cell phone company to showcase its products on a wall inside the area, and a mural illustrates the Gorilla using a Verizon Wireless phone.

The playground at America West Arena has 10,000 square feet of space for youngsters to roam.

The play area sets the standard for major league facilities creating areas for young children. The slides, stairs and crawl space within the Gorilla House, the adjustable basketball hoops that allow small children to slam dunk, and the 25-cent arcade games dispensing tokens redeemable for merchandise rival anything you'll see at Chuck E. Cheese's.

"It's very Bill Veeckian for me," said Bill Sutton, a sports marketing consultant working for the Suns and several other NBA teams, referring to the late MLB owner known for his promotional schemes. "Veeck started playgrounds when he was in baseball. This is the evolution from that idea [and] as far as you can get. It's one of the best things out there for kids."

The Jungle was jammed an hour before tipoff of the New Jersey-Phoenix game the day after Thanksgiving, and was only slightly less crowded at halftime.

Older NBA and NHL venues can use the Phoenix model to upgrade stale space in their buildings, said Bob Bangham, owner of Ripbang Studios in Venice, Calif., and the area's principal designer. The Suns freed up new real estate after last season by converting what was originally the fourth-floor ramp of the parking garage attached to the arena.



Sutton said that Philips Arena in Atlanta has a footprint conducive to convert existing space into a kids playground, and that the Orlando Magic could carve out a substantial children's interactive zone as team officials continue their efforts to develop a new arena.

"If we had the space, we'd do it in a heartbeat," said Tom Wilson, president and CEO of Palace Sports and Entertainment, owner of the Palace of Auburn Hills and the Detroit Pistons. Wilson, also CEO and governor for the Tampa Bay Lightning, visited America West Arena and saw the Jungle while attending the recent NHL meetings in Scottsdale.

"All of us are looking at how do we make the event bigger than the games," Wilson said. "As more and more people see this in action, I think you'll see more of these areas springing up in the next 10 years."

Finding sponsors to pay for renovations makes even more sense to develop kids zones, Bangham said.

"The value to the teams is creating a stronger relationship with their fans that don't pay for the top-dollar ticket," he said. "Paying \$50 to \$60 on a 5-year-old is a big commitment for them. You might buy a \$25 ticket, but you can't take them there without getting all the other [food and souvenirs]."

The idea germinated from the Suns' quest to accommodate fans sitting in the cheap seats upstairs who didn't have "any place to sit down and dress their hot dog," Bangham said.

The Jungle contains sit-down space for parents and features the least expensive food in the arena, but the Suns discovered that kids flocking to the area aren't concentrating on grabbing ketchup packs for their french fries.

"They're not sitting down and having a meal," said Peterson, mentioning the interactive zone's only aspect that hasn't met the Suns' expectations. "For kids, that's a waste of time. They just want to enjoy the entertainment."

The team's research indicated that about 500 children ages 5 to 7 are attending weeknight games, a figure that surprised Bangham. "I had guessed 150 to 200," he said. "We knew we had a big audience for this."

