

# ULM basketball wins spark attendance

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(Photo: Emerald Harris/ULM Photo Services)

There was one thing ULM could take with it back to Monroe following game 1 of the CBI finals.

It wasn't the game, a 65-58 loss to Loyola-Chicago, and definitely not the situation. The Warhawks now have to sweep two games to win the CBI in the best-of-three championship format.

Instead, it's what ULM head coach Keith Richard knows is waiting back at Fant-Ewing Coliseum.

A full-on basketball revival is underway at ULM, and it's only kept growing as the Warhawks got further and further through the CBI bracket.

ULM's "White-Out Wednesday" campaign in the CBI semifinals against Vermont was a success on two fronts. The Warhawks not only got the win, but they did it in front of 3,368 fans clad in white.

It was so successful, in fact, that ULM is doing it again, hosting 'White-Out 2.0' on Wednesday when Loyola makes its way to Monroe for game 2.

"The crowd should help us. It'll be an electric atmosphere," Richard said. "It was loud in here (at Loyola's Gentile Arena), and it got to us for a moment, so we need to reciprocate that when we come home."

ULM athletic director Brian Wickstrom is already anticipating a bigger crowd than the Vermont game. Only general admission seats at Fant-Ewing are still available — floor seats, reserve seats and student tickets are all sold out.

"We've already sold more tickets for Wednesday than the last game," Wickstrom said. "I don't know if we'll get a sellout, but we're going to have a great crowd."

ULM's attendance has been a far cry from what it was in the early '90s when hall of fame coach Mike Vining led the NLU Indians to four straight NCAA tournaments in front of average crowds of more than 3,000.

The moderate gains in attendance have mirrored Richard's total rebuild of the program after walking into severe Academic Progress Rate penalties in 2010. ULM drew an average 1,255 fans for a four-win team in 2012 and 1,513 for last year's group that won 10 games.

ULM won 20 games for the first time in 13 years in 2015 with an average of 1,923 fans filling Fant-Ewing Coliseum.

The crowd that watched the Warhawks' win over Vermont trailed only the 3,502 that watched ULM get the sweep over the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in February. ULM's best season since 2002 produced three crowds of more than 3,000.

Part of the rise in the attendance at Fant-Ewing has come from Wickstrom's efforts to rally student support on campus. Wickstrom has spoken to several organizations on campus and engaged them on Twitter.

"They just want to know they're a part of this, and we want them to have the best student experience possible," Wickstrom said. "We want to make sure that any student who wants to come to the game will always have a ticket."

It took some research on their part, but 'basketball 101' is becoming the most popular course in the ULM curriculum.

"It's been a learning experience but just following the team and having a winning team makes it that much more fun," said Hamilton Winters, who always sits on the front row of the student section along with the rest of ULM's chapter of Kappa Sigma. "I've been a student for two years and the last two years we've been coming. We would sit in here sometimes with less than 100 people and it felt like a scrimmage.

"This year has been completely different. You can't hear yourself talk, and it's an electric atmosphere."

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