

# Play Ball!

## *The Treasure Valley Offers Families Several Reasonably Priced Opportunities to Enjoy Professional Sports*

By Donna Bush

After Boise State's dramatic victory in the Fiesta Bowl, Treasure Valley residents are hungry to see big-time sports, and fortunately, opportunities are plentiful. All four major sports are represented, with the Idaho Stampede (basketball), Idaho Steelheads (hockey), Boise Hawks (baseball), and the new Boise Burn (arena football team), so there is something for everyone.

Though there is no "major league" franchise in the area, families will find exciting minor league teams that offer an equal (if not greater) entertainment value, at a much lower price. Unlike major league teams, minor league franchises don't sign players to long-term, multi-million dollar contracts, so their challenge is to rely on a smaller budget and unlimited creativity to promote the event. For the minor league fan, that's a major plus, because no matter what the score is at the end of the game, the fan is the winner.

Bonnie Way Snider, who serves as the Communications and Media Director for both the Idaho Steelheads and the Boise Burn, says, "We put a lot of thought and effort into providing great game entertainment. We have something for everyone, from the diehard fan to the casual fan. Our goal is that everyone will walk away saying they had a great time."

Steve Brandes, general manager of the Idaho Stampede, echoes that statement. "We want families to forget their troubles for the night and leave without knowing the score of the game," he says. That is, Brandes wants families to look back and remember what a great time they had at a Stampede game, regardless of the outcome.

Part of the appeal of minor league sports is the chance to see young players at the start of their careers. Ken Hyde, Director of Marketing for the Boise Hawks, notes that former Hawks in the major leagues now include Dontrelle Willis (Florida Marlins) and Jeff Samardzija (Chicago Cubs). The Hawks are the short-season, single-A level affiliate of the Chicago Cubs.

Most of their players are straight out of college. "These guys play 76 games in 79 days," says Hyde, and throughout the season, they all work to improve their skills. That's why a minor league game is a great opportunity to teach youngsters fundamentals like running out a ground ball to first base. Players hustle because they never know if it's the one play that will catch the attention a scout.

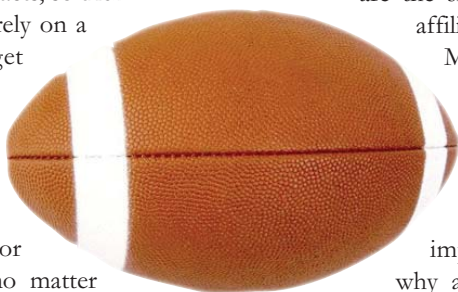
Several former BSU players have joined the Boise Burn, part of the af2 arena football league, which debuted at the end of March. According to Way Snider, because of the different configuration of the field, "There is a lot more



passing and the fans are really up close. The game day atmosphere is such high energy, and 'in your face.' Balls get thrown into the crowd all the time and fans get to keep them."

Sometimes big league players move down a notch or two to rehab after an injury and minor leaguers may move up to fill the roster spot. Says Brandes, "We have first- or second-year NBA players in a small market setting." The Stampede is part of the NBA D-League (Development League). It's just one step below the NBA, and the Stampede is affiliated with both the Seattle SuperSonics and the Utah Jazz, so it's likely that Stampede players will move up to one of those franchises sooner or later. For a taste of the big leagues, the Stampede has "affiliate nights" each season, complete with Stampede players donning Seattle or Utah jerseys, plus entertainment, mascots, dancers, and giveaways straight from the NBA.

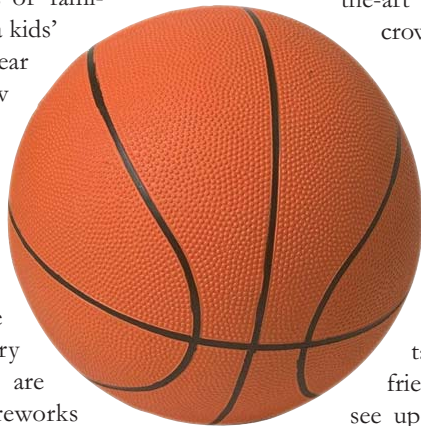
Minor league sports teams like the Stampede are aware that families are a large part of their fan base. "We tailor things toward families," says Brandes, "especially our half-time entertainment acts." Those can include zany "Vegas-style" acts like acrobats and a woman who shoots a bow and arrow with her feet, as well as local draws like Irish dancers and contests between sheriff and fire departments. They also have a



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kids' fun zone, which includes pop-a-shots, video games, and an area for sign-making each weekend so youngsters can show their support for players.

The Boise Hawks have also considered the needs of families by providing a kids' park, which this year will include new bounce houses, obstacle courses, and speed pitch, plus the very popular Wiffle ball park. Kids get to run the bases after every game, and there are post-game fireworks every Friday night, as well as on July 3 and 4. And no minor league baseball game is complete without the nutty between-inning promotions like musical chairs, dizzy bat races, and kids singing during the Seventh Inning Stretch with the team mascot, Humphrey.



The Steelheads, who are an AA franchise affiliated with the Dallas Stars, have contests like Dance for Your Dinner and the very popular Mighty Mites hockey game that takes place on the ice between periods, all of which is shown on state-of-the-art video screens so the entire crowd can cheer them on.

The Treasure Valley might be a long way from having a major league professional sports team, but that's just as well. The variety of minor league sports teams here offers their fans an enormous entertainment value, family friendly activities, a chance to see up-and-coming players in an intimate setting (before they sign those multi-million dollar contracts), and a large dose of old-fashioned fun.

*Donna Bush is a freelance writer living in the Treasure Valley with her husband and two children. Her interests include family health and fitness, sports, and cooking.*

**ADDITIONAL INFO ON TEAMS:**

**Boise Burn:** Arena Football, part of the af2 league. Season runs from the end of March through mid-July. Games played at Qwest Arena, 233 S. Capitol Blvd., Boise. Ticket prices range from \$15-\$50. (208) 383-0080. [www.boiseburn.com](http://www.boiseburn.com)

**Boise Hawks:** Short-season Single A baseball. Season runs from mid-June through early September. Games played at Memorial Stadium, 5600 Glenwood, Boise. Ticket prices range from \$5-\$12. (208) 322-5000. [www.boisehawks.com](http://www.boisehawks.com)

**Idaho Stampede:** D-League basketball. Season runs from November through April. Games are played at Qwest Arena, 233 S. Capitol Blvd., Boise. Ticket prices range from \$7-\$19. (208) 331-TIXS (8497). [www.nba.com/dleague/idaho](http://www.nba.com/dleague/idaho)

**Idaho Steelheads:** AA ice hockey. Season runs from October through early April. Games played at Qwest Arena, 233 S. Capitol Blvd., Boise. Ticket prices range from \$7-\$28. (208) 331-TIXS (8497). [www.idahosteelheads.com](http://www.idahosteelheads.com)

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