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PURDUE

Ushers experience 'Mackey Magic' - and get paid for it, too

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Key Points

Ushers at Purdue's Mackey Arena are essential to the fan experience during basketball games.

Ushers often form personal connections with fans, players' families, and even former coaches.

Many ushers are retirees or have full-time jobs, enjoying the flexible schedule and energetic atmosphere.

WEST LAFAYETTE, IN — When the doors open 90 minutes before the Boilers take the court, fans immediately pour into the concourse of Mackey Arena, eager to find their seat among the sold-out crowd of more than 14,000 fans.

They flood past employees stationed at each section, maybe stopping to ask where the bathroom or concessions are before they shuffle past and become one face of thousands cheering for or against the Black and Gold.

It's business as usual for the gray-shirted ushers. They happily give directions, point out must-see's to those new to Mackey, and soak up the rising energy as the minutes until tipoff slip away.

“It's part of our DNA,” usher Penny Middleton said of Mackey's infamous atmosphere ahead of the Boilers' recent match against Illinois. “You can't walk in Mackey and not be a part of it.”

Her words prove true for Corey James, a coworker who said taking the job is what made him fall in love with Boiler Ball. He trades in the gray polo for a white button-

up and black vest, the uniform for ushers working at event level or in the Spurgeon or Wooden clubs.

James said he wasn't much of a college sports fan at all when he applied to Allied Universal, the facility services company that staffs Purdue Athletics events.

"But then once you get in here and you see the action, the music, the crowd, the cheering," he said, sweeping his hands farther outward with each word to describe how the energy builds. "It's kind of hard not to get into it."

Now, he and Middleton are two of 150 Allied staff members who show up hours before tipoff to "enhance the experience" for fans, home and visiting alike.

Their responsibilities during the game include helping people to their seats, answering general questions and pointing people toward first aid or guest services, James said.

They also run interference for special guests in the arena, allowing eager fans to ask Gene Keady for photos when he approves and politely denying them when he doesn't.

That's one perk of being an usher, said Sandi Walter, Allied Universal's client manager. They get to know a lot of the players' families pretty well, too.

"When Mason Gillis played here, I got to know his mom on a first-name basis," she said. "She brought me cookies! When he graduated, she brought me cookies."

The cool part about meeting these "pseudocelebrities," said Al Enlow, an usher in his fourth year with Allied, is that "they're just like everybody else." His position allows him to actually meet them, as an average person.

Some of the ushers have also befriended dedicated fans. Middleton said she has several "regulars" in her section that she keeps up with beyond basketball.

“I’ll see them out in the mall, you know, at Walmart or something, and they will come and give me a hug,” she said. She even knows when they have a birthday coming up or when they’re going on vacation.

Middleton is in her sixth year with Allied, which also provides staff for women’s basketball, football, volleyball, soccer, baseball, softball, wrestling and events in Elliott Hall of Music.

“It’s all voluntary,” Walter said, explaining how ushers are scheduled for certain games. “We send out a list of events that we have available, and they tell us when they want to work.”

Middleton said the men’s basketball games are her favorite to work, a common opinion among the ushers. Because Mackey requires so much staff, Walter is usually able to give everyone a spot who wants one.

“Volleyball is a hot commodity,” Enlow said, because Holloway Gymnasium has fewer spots to fill. He said placement for those games comes down to seniority.

Judy Johnson is in the running for the top of that list, having logged more than 25 years with the company after joining her husband in 1998, back when paychecks were distributed as envelopes full of cash.

They started as “ticket takers,” changing clothes in a bathroom after their day jobs and running to whichever facility was hosting the Boilers that night.

They stay until every single person leaves, even if that takes hours. Now it’s about an hour; when Zach Edey was on the team, it was usually two, because he was well known for graciously meeting with fans.

The pay is hourly, and the number of hours vary but are typically a max of 15 a week.

Men’s basketball, specifically, has become a sort of family affair for Johnson, with her son keeping score and two of her grandkids serving as managers for the team

throughout the years.

Johnson has now joined the group of ushers who are retirees finding a way to connect with people, but plenty of the ushers have a full-time job, including James.

Walters said the flexible schedule Allied provides allows a variety of people to work there, including retirees, full-timers looking for some extra cash and even students.

Do they ever tire of witnessing hundreds of “Sandstorm” dances, “Whose house?” chants and renditions of Purdue’s fight song, “Hail Purdue”?

Every usher the Journal & Courier spoke to said no.

Middleton raved about the band, and Enlow said he “enjoys it every time.”

“I wear hearing aids,” Johnson said of the famous Mackey noises levels, “so sometimes I have to take them out.”