

Fitzgerald to Host Charitable Sixth Annual Celebrity Softball Game

Written by Taylor Seely

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Seven years ago Arizona Cardinal's wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald partnered with Fox 10 Sports Reporter Gayle Jansen in a celebrity basketball game to raise money and support for a nonprofit organization in Malawi, Africa. After Jansen had kids, Fitzgerald carried out the fun new tradition with a twist: changing the format to a softball game. This Saturday (gates at Salt River Fields in Scottsdale open at 5:30 p.m.), Fitzgerald will host his [sixth annual Celebrity Softball Game](#) benefiting his organization, the First Down Fund. The fund, which he began in 2005, helps children and families in need live healthier lifestyles through various forms of assistance. AZFoothills.com spoke with Fitzgerald this past week to hear more about his plans for this weekend's game.

The first year you began the softball game, did you think six years later it would still be happening? I always hoped it was going to last and really put forth a lot of effort to make sure it was sustainable, so to see it still growing--this year we've actually sold more tickets before the game than we have in the last five seasons that we've done this--it just shows that people enjoy it.

How has the softball game changed since the first year? I think we found a formula that worked early on, and we try to stick to the game plan. We used to do it in the daytime, and you know, it would get a little hot at the end of May, mid-90's. We asked the public, "What would you change?" So (we've made) small changes like that, but in terms of anything major, we haven't done anything.

Since shifting from day to night, has attendance increased? It definitely has gone up. I think later in the evening...parents are just at home with their children with nothing to do on a Saturday, so they come on out.

Will there be any surprise guests this year? Yeah, we actually have a couple people that we're still working on logistics with. So every year there's a couple, three or four last-minute additions, and I don't think it will be any different this year.

How much money was raised to benefit the First Down Fund last year, and have there been any specific projects you really enjoyed putting on or contributing to in the last year? Last year we did over \$200,000, and I think that's been pretty consistent through the whole time. This year we're actually adding a golf component, so I think it will be even better...in terms of revenue generated. First Down Fund, I want to say in 2004, focused on breast cancer research and awareness and youth activities. We sponsor a lot of youth organizations that enhance kids' abilities to find their truth passions and loves. We do a lot of technology upgrades and computer labs in schools; I think bridging the gap in technology is really important, so kids can compete. It doesn't matter if you go to the best of the best schools or a school that may not rank as high. You should still be able to have the same benefits so you can achieve your goals. So that's what we're really passionate about.

How long does it take you to plan the event? When do start working on it? As soon as we wrap up this year, we move on again to next year. It takes a lot of work and logistics, but (there are people who have)... been with us since day one and they've been unbelievable with their commitment and dedication to continue to help us grow.

At the end of the day, what is it about the event that makes it so fun and worth it all? The partnerships I think. The people that continue to come back. Pro Sports Realty or UFC and the W. Organizations that support you year in and year out, and they start as this sponsor, (and) then they turn into friends and become business associates. Then you see some of the fans that come out and they've been here all six years, and it's great to be able to interact with them and see them. You know, you see their kids growing up! Those are some of the things I enjoy most about it.

So you've actually developed relationships with the fans and families? Oh yeah. There're people who sit in the same places every single year and their son or daughter will be growing, growing, growing. You see them and it's always real cool to know they support you, on or off the field. You know, (the ones that are like), "I'm a season ticket holder, and I also come and support your events every year, too." So it means a great deal.

How would you say these smaller relationships are impacting your relationship with the greater community? I think the fans support us--they come and spend their hard-earned money...paying \$100 to go watch a game with concessions and parking. It's not a cheap thing to do. We players understand that if it weren't for their support, we wouldn't be able to do what we do. So I think we have to pay it forward and let them know that what you do off the field is more important than what you do on, and to serve and be a good father and role model in the communities you live in.

If you were to explain the game to someone who has never been, do you have a favorite memory you might share? It's a lot of fun. The guys are just clowns. Donovan McNabb and guys like that...make it so much fun. They clown around and have fun just dancing around, just making it a very enjoyable experience. Then between innings (and) signing autographs, I think that's why people enjoy it--those fan-celebrity interactions.

What are you most excited about for this year's game? I'm praying it's a good weather day. Last year we got sprinkled on a little bit, so I

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hope it's just a typical Arizona day and people can come out and enjoy themselves and take in...all that it is.

Are you worn out by the end of the game? No. You know what wears me out? In the morning I go run in the Pat Tillman run first thing in the morning, then I come home and go watch my son's baseball game, then get off my feet for a little bit and take a little nap. Then I go to the game and then get ready for the W after.

Do you sleep in the next day? No. I have my son's birthday party the next day. So it's busy, busy, busy.

Readers interested in attending the big game should expect to see the following celebrities, plus a few surprise guests in addition:

- **Larry Fitzgerald**, Arizona Cardinals Wide Receiver
- **Terrell Owens**, Former All-Pro Wide Receiver
- **Luis 'Gonzo' Gonzalez**, Former Arizona Diamondbacks Outfielder
- **PJ Tucker**, Phoenix Suns Forward
- **Kendra Wilkinson Baskett**, Model/TV Personality
- **Hank Baskett**, Former NFL Wide Receiver
- **Michael Floyd**, Arizona Cardinals Wide Receiver
- **Demaryius Thomas**, Denver Broncos Wide Receiver
- **Andra Fuller**, Actor
- **AzMarie Livingston**, Actress
- **Laura Govan**, TV Personality
- **Derrick Morgan**, Tennessee Titans Linebacker
- **Andre Ellington**, Arizona Cardinals Running Back
- **GiGi**, recording artist & model
- **Anquan Boldin**, San Francisco 49ERS Wide Receiver
- **Roddy White**, Atlanta Falcons Wide Receiver
- **Andre Roberts**, Washington Redskins Wide Receiver
- **Penny Taylor**, WNBA Phoenix Mercury Forward
- **Mike Phillips**, Jazz Artist
- **Calais Campbell**, Arizona Cardinal Defensive End
- **LT Hutton**, Multi-Platinum Producer
- **Alan Anderson**, NBA Washington Wizards
- **Jagger Eaton**, Pro Skateboarder
- **Cody Ransom**, Former Arizona Diamondback Third Baseman
- **Brandon Browner**, Seattle Seahawks Cornerback