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Link to Iraq a big win for families

Teleconferences set at UofL-UK game

By Tom Loftus

tloftus@courier-journal.com

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FRANKFORT, Ky. — Rob Sprang had a brainstorm — to bring Kentucky's top annual basketball game to U.S. troops in Iraq and let some families back home talk to their loved ones there.

Sprang, a University of Kentucky project manager for a hospital teleconference network, learned by chance about two teleconference centers that a nonprofit foundation built in Iraq for soldiers to talk with their families, and contacted someone at the group.

"I asked him if the troops were interested in sports, and he said they love sports. So I told him we could send them the hottest ticket in Kentucky — a great game and one that every Kentuckian over there would be vitally interested in," Sprang said.

Next he began coordinating with officials from state government, Kentucky's two largest universities, military officials and ESPN, the TV sports network.

The result was announced yesterday by Gov. Ernie Fletcher:

A week from today, during the University of Kentucky-University of Louisville basketball game at Freedom Hall, 18 Kentucky families will be given a half-hour each to talk privately with their loved ones in Iraq from facilities set up in the Kentucky Fair & Exposition Center.

A separate video link will broadcast the basketball game live to troops at Camp Cook in Baghdad.



BY STEWART BOWMAN, THE C-J
Rob Sprang met with Judy Rittenhouse, who will get to speak to her son, Marine Cpl. Michael Rittenhouse, 24. Sprang is a University of Kentucky project manager for a hospital teleconference network.

IRAQ TELECONFERENCE

To apply to be one of 18 Kentucky families that will participate in the Iraq teleconference at next weekend's UK-UofL basketball game, send an e-mail to freedomcalls@kthnschedule.com, giving the soldier's name, base in Iraq and a contact name for the family.

And live images of the troops will be broadcast before, during and after the game on ESPN and on jumbo screens in Freedom Hall.

"This will allow fans watching the game to see and hear the soldiers on the big screen TVs in Freedom Hall. And the troops in Iraq will be able to see, hear and feel Kentuckians' love, support and appreciation," Fletcher said at a news conference at the Capitol.

"Their Old Kentucky Home may be far, far away in distance, but we certainly hold our heroes close in our hearts," he said.

`A wonderful thing'

Families who will be talking to their loved ones in Iraq will be brought onto the court before the game and will stand with Fletcher and the presidents of the two universities during the national anthem.

But during the game, they will watch the game at a private reception, while each takes a turn for their private conversations.

Leaders from the sports and military communities hailed the move to give a patriotic flavor to the biggest annual event on Kentucky's basketball calendar.

Tom Leach, radio voice of the Kentucky Wildcats, said, "I'm astutely aware of how passionate the two sides are in this rivalry. So we will have at least one unifying feeling on the 18th of December at Freedom Hall."

Sprang, 47, said five of the 18 families had been selected as of yesterday to take part in the teleconference.

Judy Rittenhouse, a health administration officer at the Veterans Administration hospital in Lexington, will speak to her son, Marine Cpl. Michael Rittenhouse, 24, a reservist with Military Police Company A of Lexington.

"The opportunity to see him for a half-hour is a wonderful, wonderful thing," she said. "Every day you live with the anxiousness of what's going on over there. As a mom, it's very difficult."

She said Michael's wife, Sara, and other family members also will talk with him.

Regular links to start

Sprang said he expects to get more requests for the link than can be honored next weekend.

But starting in January, the Kentucky Telehealth Network will schedule regular videoconferencing to link families who go to one of the 70 network hospitals across the state with their loved one in Iraq, he said.

The families chosen so far were found largely by "word of mouth" among the hospitals and their employees, Sprang said.

He said the private teleconferences won't cost taxpayers anything.

The major costs are the sending and receiving equipment, which already exist, he said.

The U.S. military and the Freedom Calls Foundation — the nonprofit group that built the teleconference centers in Iraq — cover the cost of transmitting the signals by satellite.

Sprang gave most of the credit for the effort to Freedom Calls.

When he learned about the group in early November, he said, "I knew immediately about the possibilities, so I called them. ... I realized I was in a unique position to get something done. The more I thought about it, I realized this was the right thing to do."

Once the hospitals and other members of the network embraced the idea, Sprang called Tony Goetz, a friend and former UK official now on Fletcher's staff.

"Tony then took it and ran with it. He had all of the close connections in the Governor's Office, the Commerce Cabinet, the National Guard and the universities. They all liked the idea and went to work on it," Sprang said.