

Buckeye Cruise Raises \$3M For Cancer Research

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The Serenade of the Seas – a Royal Caribbean cruise ship that holds nearly 2,500 passengers – sailed out of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on Feb. 21 with a group on board that had more than one thing in common.

First off, the passengers on the ship were all Buckeyes. Second, they were all there for two reasons – to enjoy a five-day cruise through the Caribbean and to raise money for cancer research.

By the time the 2018 Buckeye Cruise for Cancer returned to Fort Lauderdale on Feb. 26, \$3 million had been raised to benefit the Urban & Shelley Meyer Fund for Cancer Research and The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center – Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital, better known simply as The James.

The mark of \$3 million was a new high in the 11-year history of the cruise, which raised \$2.5 million in 2017.

Before the cruise hit a new fundraising milestone – and before passengers enjoyed stops in Key West, Fla., and Labadee, Haiti – festivities got started at the Tropical Theatre on deck six of the ship. The main event on Feb. 21 was the Buckeye Spectacular, which featured appearances from Brutus, members of the alumni band and alumni cheerleaders, while those in attendance also had the chance to honor some of the sponsors for the cruise.

By the end of the night, though, the focus had turned at least partially to those who weren't on the cruise. First off, Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer – normally a key cog in the cruise – wasn't able to make the trip this year due to football obligations (something the Buckeye faithful on board surely understood). Meyer and his wife, Shelley, recorded a video message to be played for the cruisers, but some technical difficulties on the ship prevented that from happening.

The passengers were treated to another video message – one perhaps more important than hearing from the Meyers would have been.

Like Meyer, former Ohio State linebacker and current Pittsburgh Steeler Ryan Shazier had initially intended to be on the cruise, even after he suffered a serious spinal injury during an NFL game in December before undergoing spinal stabilization surgery. Shazier, a fan favorite throughout his career in Columbus, recorded a video for the cruise, noting that he was pushing to get back to full strength.

Part of that push, Shazier said, includes a lengthy and intensive rehabilitation process, and early returns show that he has blown his doctors away with his progress. Shazier noted that he spoke with his father, who felt he was making such great strides, it would be a mistake to stunt his momentum by going on the cruise.

"(I want to get) back out there on the field and be able to run around with my family," Shazier said. "Right now that's my main goal.

"I hope everybody has a great time, and I just want to say I love you, Buckeye Nation, and O-H!"

In addition to Shazier's message, the cruise announced that first night that \$1.5 million had already been raised, thanks in part to a donation of \$250,000 from Tom and Kathy Huff. Tom Huff, who briefly spoke to remind everyone to keep his



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JUDGING EYES – The Ohio State and Roosters mascots helped judge a dance contest during the 2018 Buckeye Cruise for Cancer.

"great friend Ryan Shazier" in mind, wore a #SHALIEVE T-shirt that night, as did Brutus and some of the other performers in honor of Shazier.

The following morning, cruisers woke up at port in Key West in the Florida Keys, with stunning views of the archipelago. Early risers gathered at 7:45 a.m. to disembark and participate in the "Finish in Key West" walk/run, which included a three-mile run at 9 a.m. and a one-mile walk at 9:15.

Others on the ship had a more leisurely day, with a free day in Key West to explore the island, or a chance to relax and enjoy the amenities on the ship, which included an outdoor pool, a fitness center, a basketball court, a climbing wall, various bars and eateries and a casino, among many other things.

That night, the ULTIMATE Buckeye Experience Auction took place, with some truly stellar items and opportunities being auctioned off to fund the cause.

To start things off, Columbus' own Dom Tiberi, a sports anchor on 10TV, served as MC, but he was outshone by Kerry Coombs, who took the stage to help with a few auction items.

Coombs, always a fan favorite in Columbus, opted to leave Ohio State for an opportunity with the Tennessee Titans this year, but he made sure to be on the cruise regardless.

"Now I'm coaching for the Tennessee Titans, which is Buckeye South in Nashville," Coombs said.

Coombs' first item was an authentic pair of Gold Pants – he ended up selling three for \$6,500 each. He also auctioned off a Titans helmet signed by Buckeye great Mike Vrabel – the team's new head coach. The helmet went for \$2,500.

While Coombs turned out to be a stellar auctioneer, former Ohio State star running back Ezekiel Elliott, now of the Dallas

Cowboys, might have to stick to his day job. Normally outgoing in the spotlight, Elliott took the stage to auction off three of his signed jerseys, but he shied away from the microphone for the most part. Elliott had a good sense of humor, though, when bidding got started slowly, whispering, "Nobody?" Before adding, "Crickets." Eventually, each of his three jerseys were auctioned off for a few thousand dollars apiece.

Another top item was a helmet signed by quarterback J.T. Barrett, on which he wrote: "It was a 1st Down Harbaugh." Followed by the score of the 2016 Ohio State-Michigan game – OSU 30, TTUN 27.

The most expensive piece in the auction turned out to be an Ohio State charm bracelet donated by Todd Snyder of Rockledge Jewelers. It went for a whopping \$30,000 and includes 262 diamonds, 24 rubies, 54 grams of 14k gold and three carats of diamonds.

After departing Key West, cruisers were treated to Roosters' Fun, Casual Day at Sea on Feb. 23, which featured a multitude of events, including autograph sessions with various Buckeye greats, a dance-off featuring former Ohio State basketball star J.J. Sullinger and a college football preview with former Buckeye running back Robert Smith and linebackers James Laurinaitis, A.J. Hawk, Matt Wilhelm and Bobby Carpenter.

While most of the conversation was light-hearted, the panel did tackle the topic of paying college athletes, but even the former players weren't sure exactly what the correct path would be for the NCAA.

"You can't pay the players with the tax implications and the nonprofit status of the universities really makes it difficult to do," Smith said. "But I think that the players should be able to earn money on their likeness and maybe cap that money. I think that accomplishes a couple things.

"Maybe you can escrow some of that money so that the players can't go get the

money unless they earn their degree. So then we would really look at our student-athletes and say, 'We want to make sure that you guys have some long-term solutions. We want you to be able to earn some of this money, but we're going to hold it back until you graduate.'"

Carpenter, who now co-hosts a show on 97.1 The Fan in Columbus, agreed with Smith's idea.

"Whether you're paying a guy for using his likeness or whatever it is, I love the escrow theory because I believe there is value in an education," Carpenter said.

That night, cruisers were treated to The Roosters Price is Right Game show, hosted by Tiberi, who went by "Dom Barker" for the event. The participants included football staffer Larry Romanoff, who has been at Ohio State for 49 years but plans to retire in the summer. Some of the contestants won big – including Romanoff – while others missed the mark.

The night also featured the Love and Marriage Game Show featuring Kerry and Holly Coombs; former Ohio State player personnel director Stan Jefferson and his wife, Shirley; Ohio State defensive line coach Larry Johnson and his wife, Christine; and director of player personnel Mark Pantoni and his wife, Kristin. In a fierce battle that included numerous laugh-inducing moments, the Pantonis came out on top.

On Feb. 24, passengers woke to stunning views of Labadee, a Haitian port and private resort run by Royal Caribbean. Guests had the entire day to enjoy the port, which included on-shore activities such as an over-water zipline, a small roller coaster, or simply relaxing on the beach or in the water – among other options.

Once back on the ship, guests enjoyed a few events poolside before heading to bed and back to sea.

Feb. 25, the final full day of the cruise, was the Better Ingredients, Better Pizza, Better Day at Sea, hosted by Papa John's.

One of the most entertaining events of the day was the Papa John's Pizza Toss Challenge, where former Ohio State football players Jake Ballard and Laurinaitis and former basketball star Terrence Dials competed by tossing fake pizza dough while going for style points.

In the end, Laurinaitis held off Ballard and Dials, the defending champ, to win the contest.

That night, the main event was the Buckeye Cruise for Cancer Night at the Races, which featured celebrity jockeys Anthony Schlegel, Tom Cousineau, Elliott, Cardale Jones, Tyvis Powell, Johnson, Carpenter, Joshua Perry, Sullinger, Laurinaitis, Kurt Coleman and two Boren brothers – Zach and Jacoby. The Borens eventually held off the field in the event, which was decided by dice rolls and included plenty of controversy.

On the final night of the cruise, a few last auction items were also sold off with Coombs again taking the stage. The final item included two grandstand seats for the Kentucky Derby, among other amenities. The cruise needed just \$10,000 for the item to hit \$3 million raised, and that bid was put up almost immediately, despite bidding opening at half that number.

Coombs, in his typical energetic manner, launched into celebration right away as the cruise had accomplished both of its goals – everyone on board had fun, and a stunning amount of money was raised for cancer research.