NACMA

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Minting a Mustang

Innovation is one of the core values of SMU Athletics. An athletics department's openness to new ideas can be a game-changer regarding the growth of a program. The key to innovation is looking into the future, seeing what's on the horizon, and being willing to take some calculated chances. As a program, we saw the writing on the wall and it boldly read "NFT."

"NFT" is a trendy buzzword today. Everyone is trying to understand this asset and the space that has taken the digital world by storm. SMU is no different, but for us, we saw something more than digital artwork. We saw it as an opportunity to connect with our younger alumni, to meet them where they are. An NFT could be considered an investment in what it represents, and what it allows the owner to access. To better understand this concept ourselves, and for our fanbase, we felt art should be our first step.

We did not want to release an NFT just for the sake of releasing one. If we were going to launch an NFT project, we wanted to do it right, to make it meaningful to both our department and, more importantly, our community. With his induction into the College Football Hall of Fame in December, it became clear to us who should be the subject of this first SMU NFT - famed "Pony Express" All-American and Mustang legend Eric Dickerson. Honoring Eric in itself would've been enough to make the NFT meaningful, but bringing in a local artist to do the artwork was the cherry on the top of this digital cake. While blockchain technology is clearly the future, it is a mountainous task to take on alone. We needed partners - and we found them in Zelus.

Zelus is company at the forefront of creativity with a passion for storytelling founded by an SMU alumnus. We agreed with Zelus that there had to be two essential aspects for an NFT project to be meaningful for everyone involved. First, the content has to reach the heart of our fans. Secondly, there had to be real-world functionality. While the digital art aspect of NFTs is groundbreaking by itself, people still crave real-world experiences like a meet-and-greet with Eric. The experiences are just as important as the art. Owning a piece of digital art is a social signal, but participating in exclusive experiences because of that ownership is a higher-form of cultural currency.

We at SMU take pride in being leaders in athletics and academics. We are proud that we will be leaders in collegiate athletics NFTs. We are proud to honor an athlete who has had such great success both in and after college. And we are proud to stay true to our commitment towards innovation in order to bring this historic collection to our community.

NADIIIAA

Corey Borchardt

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The more things change, the more they stay the same. The well-known quote attributed to French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr seems fitting as the calendar turns to 2022 and the academic year rolls on for Division III athletics administrators. From a broad perspective and in consideration of the critical issues impacting our division as a whole, there is a lot of change. Division III campus and conference administrators are faced with tackling the continuously-evolving challenges associated with name, image, and likeness as well as ensuring compliance and implementation with the new requirements in the NCAA Campus Sexual Violence Policy. Further, it seems potentially significant change is on the horizon for Division III as a result of the formal review process of the NCAA Constitution. With more divisional autonomy expected in the revised Constitution, substantial changes may ensue in time as we capitalize on a new opportunity to shape what the next chapter of Division III will look like.

Yet, despite all of these changes, the reality is for most Division III athletics administrators, the same key challenges remain. At the campus level, the critical issues impacting growth, development and success for their respective athletics departments appear to be much of the same as recent history. There is recognition that institutions continue to navigate the pandemic and toil through COVID-related challenges, now exceeding over 20 months of time and impacting three academic and fiscal years. Other institutional challenges remain for the majority of Division III athletics departments including:

• Managing the persistent pressure and demands to increase overall institutional enrollment through athletics and specifically expanding rosters and sport programs. Expectations of athletics departments to play an instrumental role in fulfilling institutional enrollment goals will certainly not decrease anytime in the near future.
• Cultivating new revenue sources specifically for athletics departments. As increases in institutional funding for athletics within annual operating budgets has disappeared or minimized considerably, athletics departments are faced with identifying new avenues for revenue in order to offer the same level of experience for its student-athletes. With operating expenses continuing to increase at a disproportionate rate compared to annual budget increases, this fiscal challenge and demand for Division III athletics administrators to "do more with less" will remain.
• Implementing new athletics facility projects and/or major renovations of existing athletics facilities. The Division III facilities "arms race" continues and price tags associated with such improvements have escalated, creating further hurdles for institutions and athletics departments to resolve.

While much of the focus of Division III this academic year has been focused on national-level topics that are undoubtedly changing, it seems critical for Division III campuses that they position their athletics administrators with the time, margin and capacity to tackle these local, campus challenges that have remained the same and are most critical to ensuring the continuation of a positive and impactful student-athlete experience.