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TAKE IT TO THE HOUSE!

We normally hear this phrase in reference to a long touchdown run or a pick-six on defense. At the University of West Florida (UWF), "TAKE IT TO THE HOUSE!" meant moving all home football games from downtown Pensacola to UWF's campus 20 minutes north. Since UWF's inaugural football season in 2016, all home games were played at Blue Wahoos Stadium in downtown Pensacola on a multiyear rental agreement. Blue Wahoos Stadium is a state-of-the-art facility owned by the City of Pensacola and is home to the Pensacola Blue Wahoos, the AA Affiliate of the Miami Marlins. Although a great setting for college football, minor league baseball made some significant changes after the COVID-19 pandemic. The biggest change was an extended baseball schedule, which created calendar conflicts for UWF's growing college football program.

In January 2022, UWF's administration decided to create a game plan and initiated preparations for hosting football games on UWF's campus. At the time, UWF only had a 100-yard turf field (Pen Air Field), scoreboard, play clocks, and field lights. There were no restrooms, visiting team locker room, press box, speakers, or even a fence surrounding the facility. Pen Air Field had strictly been a practice site for the football program. There were glaring issues and unanswered questions, but UWF's administration was optimistic and considered this predicament as an opportunity to transform a blank slate into a visionary canvas. The No. 1 priority for games held at Blue Wahoos Stadium was the same No. 1 priority for on-campus games: create a safe and exciting game day atmosphere for student-athletes and fans. After many committee and budget meetings, UWF developed a plan to proceed in a positive direction to host on-campus football games.

In late July 2022, the transformation started. Administrators worked several 70-80 hour work weeks (which, as many event and facility managers know, is not uncommon). Over the course of two weeks, InProduction installed 4,000 temporary bleachers and the press box scaffolding system. Shortly after the installation of this system, National

Construction Rentals set up 1,500 feet of temporary fencing around Pen Air Field, allowing for three main controlled entry points into the stadium on game day. Each game day, Dorsett Productions provides a portable 23-foot-wide video board, speakers, and public address system. Portable restroom trailers and units were also placed throughout the stadium. Food trucks, including Chick-fil-A, Domino's Pizza, and Sonny's BBQ, replace traditional concessions and provide fans with great options inside the stadium.

By transferring football to campus, UWF's staff unavoidably needed to reevaluate its entire operation, which was a tremendous benefit for all athletics staff (including myself). Every aspect of game day operations – from parking maps to staff trainings – had to be created from scratch. UWF's inaugural on-campus football season was a major success because everyone involved worked tirelessly and maintained flexibility.

I am very grateful UWF's staff and campus community embraced something new. Whether your facility is a temporary structure or state-of-the-art stadium, make it as welcoming as possible. Go Argos!



Erik Christianson
College Sports
Communicators
Executive Director

College Sports Communicators (CSC) is in the first several months of its huge transformation and rebrand. Plans to enhance benefits and opportunities for our members in this rebrand are already underway.

With the new All-In Membership plan instituted in August, we now have a record-setting number of communicators and creative members from all divisional levels who have joined CSC. We are approaching 4,000 members – nearly 750 more members than our previous membership high.

With this membership boost comes our major responsibility to elevate our delivery of professional development and continuing education (on both strategic and tactical practices); increase mentoring and networking opportunities; and place continued importance on spotlighting our members' work, achievements and honors.

Keeping in mind the 'why's' of our jobs – telling the stories of student-athletes while providing communications strategies and solutions for college sports – here is what our leadership is focusing on.

We want our members to know how to build and communicate messages that matter and how to produce powerful storytelling. It's never been more challenging for communicators to break through the clutter of messages and achieve measurable results. And, it's a new era for storytelling and messaging with the advent of AI (artificial intelligence) writing. Also, the workforce is changing, and organizations must adapt to meet the expectations of this emerging talent pool.

We have both a challenge and an opportunity before us. Amid the turbulence of the last three years, communications professionals came through as central to decision-making regarding issues such as COVID, competitions canceled or rescheduled, racial injustice and diversity, and equity and inclusion. The role of communications was elevated (and thrived) in this period of uncertainty. Institutional and athletics leaders looked to their communicators for help with proactive messaging strategies.

Now, we have an opportunity to capitalize on this, continuing to emphasize the value of

communications/PR and work with college athletics leaders to continually adapt to the changing role of communicators and creatives. The words of leading international marketing communications expert Ivan Pollard of The Conference Board, a not-for-profit think tank in New York City, state it well: "We have to start asserting the role of communications not as a crisis-responder (or tactician), but as a value-creator for the long term. Toward that end, do good work and tell great stories."

To help CSC members accomplish this, we give them opportunities to invest in their own career development via webinars, videos, and resource content libraries. Our upcoming Annual Convention in Orlando this June – rebranded as #CSCUNITE23 – in conjunction with the NACDA & Affiliates Convention Week is where we join with colleagues from these affiliates to provide programming and networking, giving our members a chance to build on their strategic, creative, and analytic skills. We hope you will encourage your communicators and creatives to attend #CSCUNITE23.

CSC's focus is to listen to our members and be a trusted and responsive source for them. Along with our college athletics peers, we continue to tackle big issues and challenges, focus on what our industry needs now, and be at the forefront of finding ways to impact change.