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H2P

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH ATHLETICS MAGAZINE SPRING 2021

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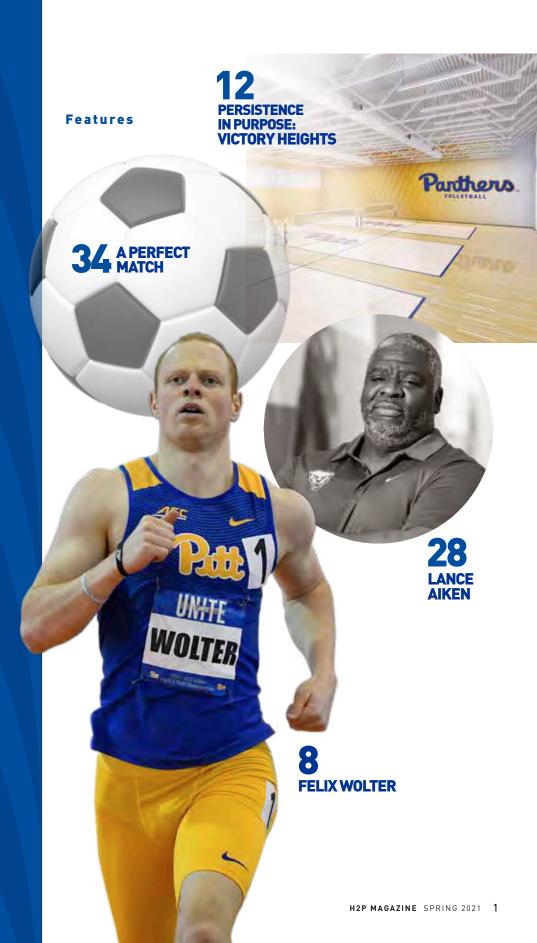
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FROM THE DIRECTOR OF ATHLETICS

Dear Pitt friends,

It has been more than a year now since the global pandemic was declared a public health emergency and everything we knew and counted on changed in an instant. While we have experienced challenges in our history, none has compared to those we all faced in 2020.

As we begin to move safely forward, I would like to express my gratitude to you for your unwavering support of the University Pittsburgh Department of Athletics during one of the most challenging years in the history of our country and college sports. I am so thankful we could count on you!

Thanks to your passion and commitment, we were able to continue to provide the high level of support that is synonymous with Pitt. Academically, our student-athletes managed remote learning incredibly well, as 17 of our 19 teams earned a 3.0 cumulative GPA as a team and 67% of our student-athletes earned a GPA of 3.0 or higher. Both figures are above our average and impressive considering the challenges of living through a pandemic. Several of our athletic programs enjoyed unprecedented athletics success, too, most notably women's volleyball's "Elite Eight"run and men's soccer win of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) Coastal Division Championship and run to the College Cup. From a health and wellness standpoint, the COVID positivity rates among our student-athletes and staff were well below the county average, in large part due to our tremendous sports medicine staff and our partnership with UPMC.

Now, with the distribution of vaccines, we look forward to a return to normal that includes seeing all of you again at our events, beginning on September 4, when the football team takes on UMASS at Heinz Field. Thank you to those of you who have renewed your football season tickets. Our team is grateful for your support!

Victory Heights, understandably, was put on pause during the pandemic, and now it is exciting to share that the project is moving forward with a new timeline established.

We will break ground on the new arena and sports performance center in the fall of 2022! A relaunch of the Victory Heights campaign is under way, led by Lee Roberts, our new executive associate athletic director for philanthropy and engagement. I am excited for Panther nation to get to know Lee. He is a talented leader and will be a driving force for our Victory Heights campaign. We are thrilled to have him at Pitt!

Victory Heights is a transformative vision that will position our student-athletes to compete for both ACC and national championships at Pitt. A visible and demonstrated commitment by Pitt Athletics and the University to provide state-of-the-art training and learning environments, Victory Heights will positively impact 85% of our student-athlete population by providing the necessary resources to achieve at the highest levels. Complementing the University's reputation as a world-class academic institution, Victory Heights will be a beacon for elite student-athletes.



During a recent visit to campus, Jim Phillips, the new commissioner of the Atlantic Coast Conference, met with Pitt's coaches, including Panthers football coach Pat Narduzzi.

The first phase of Victory Heights—the third-floor completion of the Petersen Sports Complex project in November 2020—has already had an immediate impact on recruiting, training and daily preparation for competition. The enhancement of the Petersen Sports Complex will enable our programs to maintain their momentum of success and eventually transform a season of achievement into long-term national prominence. Victory Heights is a game changer!

Thank you for sharing in our excitement for Victory Heights. Our donors' financial support makes it possible for Pitt Athletics to achieve comprehensive excellence and give our student-athletes an **extraordinary experience**. We will continue to work hard to maximize every donation and remain as grateful as ever for your generosity!



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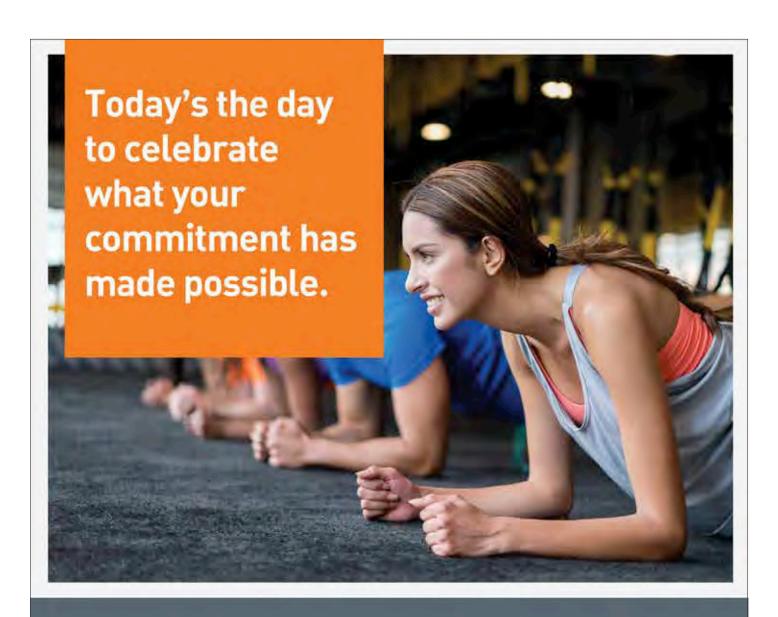








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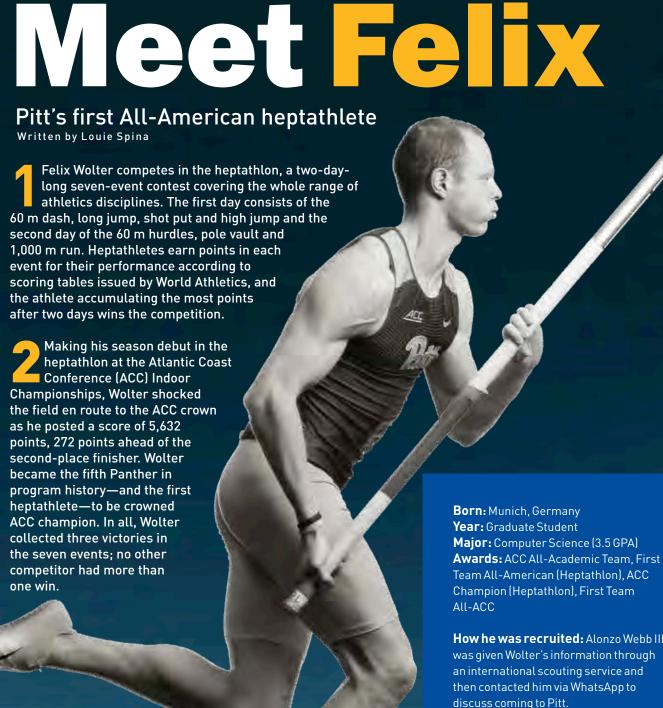
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Meet Felix



How he was recruited: Alonzo Webb III was given Wolter's information through an international scouting service and then contacted him via WhatsApp to

Why he chose Pitt: "After a couple talks with Coach Zo [Alonzo Webb III] and looking at the master's in computer science curriculum, I believed that Pitt would be able to offer me the best combination of athletics and academics." Wolter turned in the performance of a lifetime at the 2021 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) indoor track and field championships in Fayetteville, Arkansas, as he posted a fourth-place finish in the heptathlon. That finish earned Wolter First-Team All-America honors, and he became the first Pitt heptathlete in program history to earn the national recognition.

The Munich, Germany, native smashed the school record

The Munich, Germany, native smashed the school record in the heptathlon with a score of 5,907 points at the NCAA indoor championships. The previous school record of 5,159 points had stood for six years until Wolter turned in one of the most impressive performances in program history.

Appearing in the biggest meet of his collegiate career at the NCAA indoor championships, Wolter wasn't fazed by the pressure throughout the grueling seven-event gauntlet of the heptathlon. He performed at a high level in every event, posting six personal record marks and three top-10 Pitt marks in the process.

Assistant Coach Alonzo Webb III has worked closely with Wolter during his time as a Panther and has helped him to take his talent to a new level since arriving on campus. Webb had high praise for the transfer student-athlete: "Felix is one of those athletes who makes it easy as a coach. Athletes like him only come around once in a while, and it's fun to be a part of their progress and journey. He is driven [and] focused, meets every expectation daily and exceeds every goal set out for himself. His maturity allows for a great coach-athlete relationship to build, and it's been very productive to this point. He is also a great teammate and gets those around him to want to be great and to work at 100% each and every

Wolter's performance at the NCAA indoor championships was the 22nd best in the world this year and the third best by a German athlete.

practice."







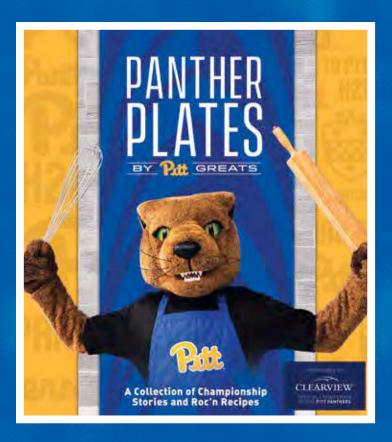
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Pitt's Victory Heights Plan Back on Track

Written by Pat Bostick

On January 14, 2020, University of Pittsburgh Director of Athletics Heather Lyke stood alongside Chancellor Patrick Gallagher before an eager group of student-athletes, coaches and loyal donors to unveil her transformative vision for Victory Heights. The plan featured a \$250 million investment in Pitt's athletics facilities, including a new 3,500-seat arena for gymnastics, volleyball and wrestling; a cutting-edge athletic performance center for strength and conditioning and sports medicine; and an eight-lane 300-meter indoor track and band facility.



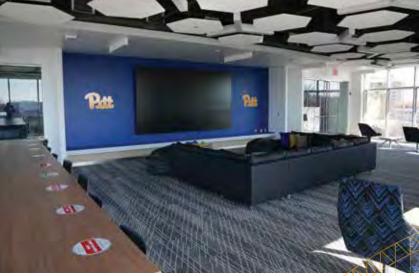
he project also called for a \$16 million third-floor addition to and expansion of the Petersen Sports Complex, including new video meeting student-athlete space; lounge; and offices for Pitt's baseball, softball, women's lacrosse, and men's and soccer women's coaching staffs. In sum, these facilities would combine to serve 16 of Pitt's 19 varsity teams and 85% of Pitt's studentathletes. The great majority of our teams currently train and compete in the 70-yearold Fitzgerald Field House, while Pitt's track and field

program hasn't hosted a home event since Pitt Stadium was razed in 1999.

"For far too long, a significant percentage of our student-athletes have practiced and competed in facilities that do not reflect the expectations and aspirations of the University of Pittsburgh," Lyke said at the press conference. "Today's announcement is the first step in transforming our facilities into game-changing assets."

"Victory Heights is about coming together as a community and doing our part to drive comprehensive excellence," Gallagher agreed. "And it's about taking the steps needed to give each of our studentathletes the very best environment to learn, grow and reach their highest potential."

In the months leading up to and following the landmark announcement, Pitt Athletics began generating significant donor support for the project. Champions Advisory Board member Jeff Martchek and his wife, Sandra, made a \$1.25 million commitment in January 2020. In recognition of the Martcheks' generosity, the spectacular new strength and conditioning space (pictured at left) within the new Victory Heights Sports Performance Complex will bear the Martchek family name.





Above, left to right: the Lieberman Student-Athlete Lounge; the wrestling practice facility

"Sandra and I are thrilled to support Victory Heights," Martchek said. "As a Champions Advisory Board member, I've seen firsthand the competitive disadvantages our current facilities present. We are proud to support Chancellor Gallagher and Heather Lyke's vision to bridge that gap and elevate Pitt Athletics to new levels of success."

With nearly \$10 million in gifts and commitments, momentum on the fundraising trail and preparations beginning for the schematic design process, things seemed to be going according to plan. However, no one could have foreseen what the next 14 months would entail.

On March 12, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of the Atlantic Coast Conference basketball tournament, and the spring sports season soon followed suit. Given the unforeseen and unprecedented set of challenges, some might have found it difficult to look past the most immediate and pressing tasks at hand. While Lyke's focus undoubtedly shifted to taking the measures necessary to keep Pitt's student-athletes and staff safe and to allow for an eventual return to competition, she always kept an eye toward the future. Progress, though unavoidably slowed, needed to continue.

"We call our core values our bridges," Lyke reflected. "One of those bridges is 'Persistence in Purpose,' which to me means staying focused on our goals and determined to achieve excellence in everything we do. Our student-athletes "We call our core values our bridges," Lyke reflected. "One of those bridges is 'Persistence in Purpose,' which to me means staying focused on our goals and determined to achieve excellence in everything we do."

have shown incredible perseverance and resolve through this pandemic. I wanted it to be clear to them, our staff, [our] donors and the community at large that we would not only get through this together but make real progress and forge ahead through these challenges."

Despite a nearly yearlong pause on progress for Victory Heights and other campus capital projects due to the ongoing pandemic, Pitt Athletics was able to move forward with the planned Petersen Sports Complex project in 2020. The work was completed and unveiled in March 2021 to rave reviews from student-athletes and coaches alike.

Among the marquee features of the new and improved Petersen Sports Complex are coaches' office suites and conference rooms overlooking Vartabedian Field, Ambrose Urbanic Field and Charles L. Cost Field; the P.J. Dick, Trumbull, Lindy Paving Team Meeting Room, with theatrestyle seating; and the Bill and Sissy Lieberman Student-Athlete Lounge, with a 14-foot video wall, outdoor patio and communal spaces.

"We were impressed with Heather and her vision from day one," said Bill Lieberman, a member of Pitt's Board of Trustees. "It is our pleasure to support Pitt's efforts to better serve its studentathletes and the city of Pittsburgh. A vibrant and successful athletic department is not only a critical part of the University but the surrounding community as well."

Just as the doors opened to the Petersen Sports Complex addition, the path forward cleared for Victory Heights. At the direction of Gallagher and the Board of Trustees, several of the capital projects put on pause due to the pandemic were resumed, including Victory Heights. Phase one of the plan is under way, with schematic design in progress for the arena and sports performance center. This state-of-theart venue will sit directly next to the Petersen Events Center at the top of "Cardiac Hill." Construction is expected to begin before the fall of 2022.

The second phase of the Victory Heights plan is the indoor track and band facility. Equipping the track and field programs and the University band with a dedicated home for the first





Above, left to right: the home for track and field; the gymnastics practice facility

time in more than two decades, this complex will be located behind the Cost Sports Center. The location is optimal for these programs and also serves as a nexus point between Pitt's athletic campus and Pittsburgh's Upper Hill community. Schematic design for this facility is set to begin in the spring of 2022, with construction getting under way in the summer of 2023.

Just as design and construction have resumed, so have fundraising efforts for Victory Heights. Lyke announced the hiring of Lee Roberts as executive associate athletic director

for philanthropy and engagement in March. Roberts came to Pitt from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where he served as associate athletic director for development for the past three years.

In his new role heading up all development efforts for Pitt Athletics, Roberts worked quickly to identify a fundraising goal for Victory Heights. Set at \$25 million, this will complement a strong University investment in the Victory Heights initiative, allowing generous alumni and friends to be a part of this transformative project.

"Transformational philanthropy occurs when everyone works collaboratively to build the bridges between a family, the University and the students they will impact," said Roberts. "There is no question that Victory Heights will be transformative for our student-athletes, and we believe it will bring our donors together [in] a truly unprecedented way. We are excited to be moving forward and helping [to] make Heather's vision a reality."

That reality is coming soon, thanks to Lyke's persistence in purpose. ?







ewind to August 2020, when 28 athletes from around the world arrived at Ambrose Urbanic Field, no easy task due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, a traditional NCAA men's soccer season consisted of roughly 15-20 games from late August to early December, capped off by the NCAA College Cup-the men's soccer equivalent of basketball's March Madness. Prior to gathering on the pitch, the players, coaches and staff all met for the first time via Zoom.

"My first training was a day I will never forget," said Jasper Löeffelsend, who came to Pitt from Cologne, Germany. "I saw my teammates for the very first time, and I instantly felt welcome and had a great connection with the guys. It was the first time I put on a jersey for Pitt and the first time going out to Ambrose Urbanic Field. The condition of the field and facilities were incredible."

Löeffelsend, a graduate student with no prior collegiate playing experience, went on to become a leader for the back line of defense. Löeffelsend shined as one of the best passers in the country, finishing fourth in the country with nine assists and earning All-America Second Team and Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) Defensive Player of the Year honors.

The ACC, widely considered the toughest men's soccer conference with 14 national champions crowned since 1984, began its season in mid-September. It was joined by the Sun Belt Conference as the first two leagues to begin "normal" fall competition. From the opening kick, the Panthers began their run at history.

Pitt opened the season ranked fourth in the United Soccer Coaches poll, then the highest in program history. The Panthers rattled off five consecutive wins, with two of those victories coming against top-five teams, and earned the top spot in the nation for the first time in program history on Oct. 20. Throughout Pitt athletics history, only the football and men's basketball teams had previously achieved a number-one ranking.

The unusual season turned stressful, as the rolling Panthers were forced to cancel their last two fall regular season contests due to COVID-related issues within the program.

After nearly two and a half weeks of pause, Pitt earned its way to the number-one seed in the North Region in the ACC Men's Soccer Tournament. The Panthers defeated Duke 2-1 in the quarterfinal and Notre Dame 3-1 in the semifinal to extend their win streak to seven matches, setting a program record for consecutive wins to begin a season. Pitt made the trip to WakeMed Soccer

Park in Cary for the ACC championship final against Clemson University, the first title game appearance the program has seen. Despite a 2-1 title game loss, the Panthers reached heights they have never seen, all while dealing with a global pandemic.

After winter break, the players returned to campus to embark on the second leg of the regular season. This time, most conferences would be competing for a chance at an NCAA tournament bid. Most college soccer fans know that a spring soccer season is unheard of. For Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania natives, playing an outdoor sport during the month of February is far from ideal. The Panthers learned this early on, as their first "spring"

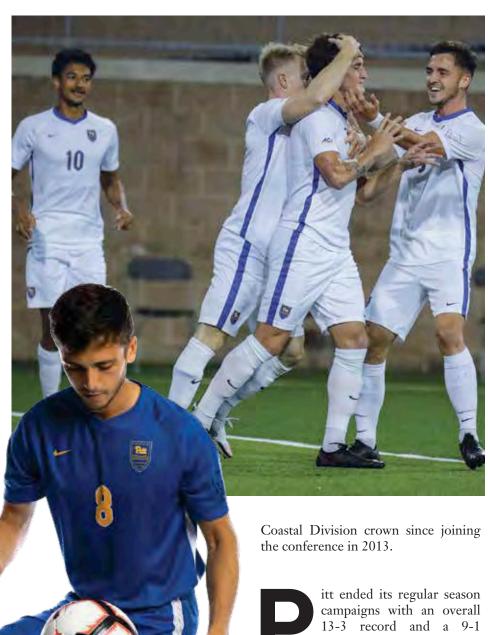


"Defeating Virginia 5-0 to clinch the ACC Coastal and seeing the boys clicking and firing on all cylinders on our home field was fun to watch," said Alexander Dexter. "A match like this is a testament to how far we have come as a team since I have been here." Dexter, who joined the Panthers during the fall of 2017 as a freshman under Vidovich's second season at the helm, knows firsthand the growth and triumph Pitt has accomplished. The Brooklyn, New York, native has logged more than 5,300 minutes on the pitch and was recently named to the 2020 All-ACC Third Team. Dexter plans to return for his fifth and final season in 2021.

contest against the University of Akron was canceled due to icy conditions on the pitch.

Pitt opened its spring campaign ranked fourth in the country, defeating Duquesne University 1-0 on Feb. 27 for the first official spring match in Pitt men's soccer history. After a loss to the University of North Carolina, the Panthers strung together a win streak that lasted five games with three shutouts. On April 6, Pitt once again earned the nation's number-one ranking, proving to its competition that its performance in the fall was no fluke.

On April 8, the Panthers rolled past Virginia 5-0 in the regular season finale, claiming the program's first-ever ACC



Valentin Noel

conference record, more than doubling its previous number for the most conference wins in a season. The next step was guaranteed but one Pitt soccer fans weren't used to: the NCAA tournament.

Pitt's three previous trips to the NCAA tournament came in 1962, 1965 and 2019, the most recent ending with a second-round loss to eventual national champion Georgetown University. But the Panthers weren't closely watching this year's selection show. They knew a top seed would be awarded, but the concept of postseason play was still very foreign to the program.

When Head Coach Jay Vidovich began his tenure at the University of Pittsburgh in 2016, the program had earned an overall record of 1029-11 and 0-22-5 in conference play since joining the ACC. He had come to Pitt from Wake Forest, where he led the Demon Deacons to a national championship in 2007 and multiple College Cup appearances.

itt began a steady climb under Vidovich's leadership. In his first season, the Panthers went 2-13-3 (0-7-2 in the ACC). In 2017, they earned their first ACC victory (over Syracuse) and finished the season 8-10 overall and 2-6 in league play.

With each passing season, Vidovich and the Panthers began to gain respect in the nation's toughest conference. In 2019, Pitt won its first ACC championship tournament match in school history against NC State in the quarterfinal. Pitt then won its first-ever NCAA tournament match with a 2-0 blanking of Lehigh.

Those successes set the foundation for Pitt to earn the second overall seed in the 2020 NCAA tournament.

The Panthers' NCAA postseason march began in Greensboro, North Carolina, where they dispatched Monmouth 6-1. They then took a short bus ride to neighboring Cary for a third-round encounter with Central Florida, defeating the Knights 4-0.

Traveling to a host site is customary for the College Cup but unusual for the entirety of the NCAA tournament. Due to restrictions set in place by the NCAA, the tournament was held in one centrally located area. A team that earned a second overall seed would typically have the good fortune to host every match until the College Cup, but soccer adapted to what the world was going through, and Pitt once again rose to the challenge.

After defeating seventh-seed Washington 3-0 in the quarterfinals, Pitt clinched a berth to the NCAA College Cup for the first time in program history. Pitt would face a third-ranked Indiana team that owned 44 NCAA tournament appearances and eight national titles. While the Hoosiers have cemented themselves as men's soccer royalty, no one was

questioning Pitt's appearance in the College Cup. They were meant to be there.

Pitt's historic season came to a close with a tough 1-0 loss to Indiana. Yet a 16-4 overall record and a taste of NCAA's premier soccer stage were achievements to celebrate. Under Vidovich and his top-notch staff, that taste is set to stay for a long time to come.

"I think we had a huge amount of growth as a team," said midfielder Jackson Walti. "A lot of that growth came from our setbacks. Whether it was losses we had or issues pertaining to COVID, we were always able to bounce back quickly. I think the next step in the team's culture and success lies in being able to learn and grow from our victories as much as from those losses."

Walti captained the midfield, starting every game during the 2020-21 season.



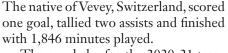
"For us, this was a tremendous season. When we started the preseason in August, we didn't know if we were going to have a season, a game or if we were going to be practicing all year. Fortunately, through leadership in the ACC, we were able to have a season and

an opportunity to grow and mature. We had opportunities to expand on that growth in

the off time between the fall and spring, and we grew out of losses and wins

as well."

—Jay Vidovich



The accolades for the 2020-21 team were many and well deserved. Valentin Noel and Löeffelsend both were named

> All-Americans, the first for the men's soccer program. Five

athletes earned United Soccer Coaches South

All-Region honors (Noel. Löeffelsend. Walti, Nico Campuzano and Veljko Petkovic). Three players received ACC honors, as Noel garnered Offensive Player of Löeffelsend Year, Defensive Player of the Year and Bertin

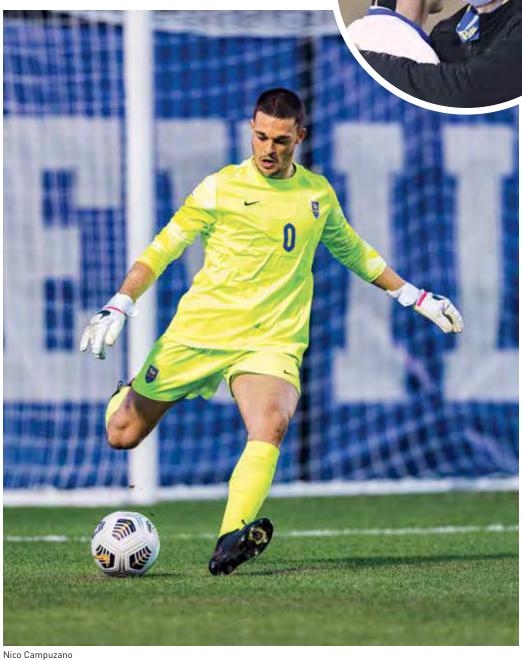
Jacquesson Freshman the Year. Ten Panthers earned All-ACC selections, received All-ACC Tournament honors and four were named National Players of the Week. A total of 18 weeks were spent in the United Soccer Coaches top

10, including seven at number one.

Vidovich was named ACC Coach of the Year for the sixth time in this career.

Pitt also produced in Noel a finalist for the MAC Hermann Trophy, college soccer's most prestigious award, given to the best male and female soccer players of the year.

Nine months after it first met on Ambrose Urbanic Field and after making history on so many other fields, this men's soccer team has earned its place on the national stage.







Senior right side hitter Chinaza Ndee receives her 2019 ACC Championship ring from head coach Dan Fisher.



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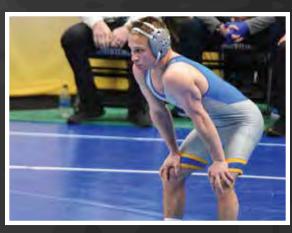
Wrestling

itt Wrestling returned to the mat in 2021 and concluded its season with the Panthers' best finish at the NCAA Championships since 1970. Thanks to five wrestlers qualifying for nationals in St. Louis and scoring points at the event, Pitt finished in 11th place with 45 points. Fourth-year head coach Keith Gavin's program made the wrestling community take notice as Jake Wentzel and Nino Bonaccorsi made thrilling runs to the NCAA finals in St. Louis, the same city where Gavin won a national title for Pitt in 2008.





Top: One of the nation's most dominant wrestlers, **Jake Wentzel** won his second consecutive ACC title at 165 pounds and was named the ACC Wrestling Scholar-Athlete of the Year as well. Above: **Nino Bonaccorsi** used a relentless attacking style to become one of the stories of the NCAA Championships, advancing to the final at 197 pounds and securing his status as an All-American. Left: **Micky Phillippi** advanced to the Round of 12 at the NCAA Championships after an undefeated regular season at 133 pounds.



Every Pitt wrestler who competed at the NCAA Championships in St. Louis won at least one match, including Cole Matthews, who wrestled for most of the season with a torn ACL and torn meniscus.







Jim Gamble (front row, second from left) and the 1981-82 Pitt men's swim team

In 1967, Newark, New Jersey, erupted in flames. Riots that summer engulfed the city—and 158 other cities across the country—in protests against repeated violence and racism toward Black Americans. That same year, four miles away, a Black child learned to swim. Jim Gamble was 5 years old when his father started taking him to the East Orange YMCA to teach him lifesaving skills: If you fall in, remain calm. Get to the wall and call for help.

Written by Liberty Ferda

he Y pool, unlike most others, was integrated and thus safer than community pools, and Gamble loved to splash around with his father. One day, a swimming coach saw Gamble swim the entire length of the pool in one go and asked his father if he would let Gamble join the Y's competitive team. Gamble's father agreed to pay for additional lessons and let Gamble try out, and at age 7, he became the very first Black swimmer on the team.

Gamble excelled in the pool. When he was 13, his family moved to Livingston, New Jersey, where he joined the middle school team and later the high school team-again as the only Black swimmer. He began practicing twice a day and competing most weekends. His Livingston YMCA team was one of the best in the state (teammate Chris Jacobs would later earn two gold medals and a silver medal in the 1988 Olympics), and Gamble thrived amid the increasing competition.

But being a rising star didn't save him from the sting of racism. Gamble's mother would drive him to out-of-state meets, knowing it might not be safe for a Black young man to venture alone through places like rural Pennsylvania or New York. At meets, kids as well as adults would call him names, threaten him and say that Black people didn't belong in the sport. Gamble's parents encouraged him to channel the negativity in a positive way, and

swimming morphed into more than just a competitive thrill.

"The water was my punching bag. I could say anything I wanted, I could make faces, and no one could see or hear," Gamble recalls. "That's how I kept going." That, and the fact that he won most of his races. The guys who sneered at him poolside might always win out in the world, but in the water, Gamble could beat them.

Swimming also was a source of camaraderie. Teammates friends as they spent hours together every day pursuing the same passion. Locker room talk turned toward graduation and future possibilities for swimming, and Gamble, like the others, wrote inquiry letters to a few university swimming programs.

Then a coach from the University of Pittsburgh called and offered him a full scholarship to join the swim team.

That coach, Fred Lewis, would shrug if you tried to call him a visionary for recruiting Pitt's first Black swimmer in 1980; he simply knew talent when he saw it. If you were good and worked hard, he took you in. Gamble signed on right away, knowing that he was making history as the first Black swimmer at Pitt and the first in his family to attend college.

Life for Gamble opened up at Pitt, in the pool and beyond. He made friends easily, and they went everywhere together, studying, talking about girls, sharing meals.

One day during his first year, Gamble and some of his new teammates gathered to play flag football on the Cathedral of Learning lawn. Gamble scored and started showing off, sauntering back and forth mockingly. The guys tackled him, ripped his corduroys and ran away. Gamble walked back to Litchfield Tower B holding the shreds of his pants together, laughing the whole way. He got the message: They would not be extra gentle or tiptoe around "the Black guy"-the guys did what they'd do to anyone who got mouthy. It was right then, with his tattered pants in his hands, that Gamble knew he really belonged.

Meanwhile, in the pool, Lewis demanded a lot, and he was especially hard on the young athletes he knew could rise to the challenge. His voice echoed off the walls in Trees Hall as he shouted critiques (and occasional praise).

Soon enough, Gamble warmed to Lewis' tough love approach and found himself improving. Although freestyle had been his favorite race in high school, he focused on honing his other strokes and swam in the 100and 200-meter breaststroke and the 200-meter individual medley (butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke and freestyle).

"Coach really made me swim better," Gamble says. There was less rage and more joy, too; he never felt he was treated differently because of race.

Lewis remembers him as a positive, smiling kid who worked hard.

"Jimmy was just part of the team," Lewis says, "part of the family."

That family won big time. The Pitt swim team came out on top all four years Gamble competed, as Eastern Atlantic Conference champions in 1981 and 1982 and Big East champs in 1983 and 1984. Gamble's dad proudly joked that he regularly drove six hours from New Jersey to watch his son swim for one minute.

Gamble stayed on at Pitt for a fifth year to finish course work in liberal arts and chemistry while serving as the swim team's assistant coach. He advised his former teammates on technique, using a softer approach training.

that complemented Lewis' vigorous Then Gamble moved out to California, where he started a career in the telephone business and had his son in the pool's deep end as a baby.

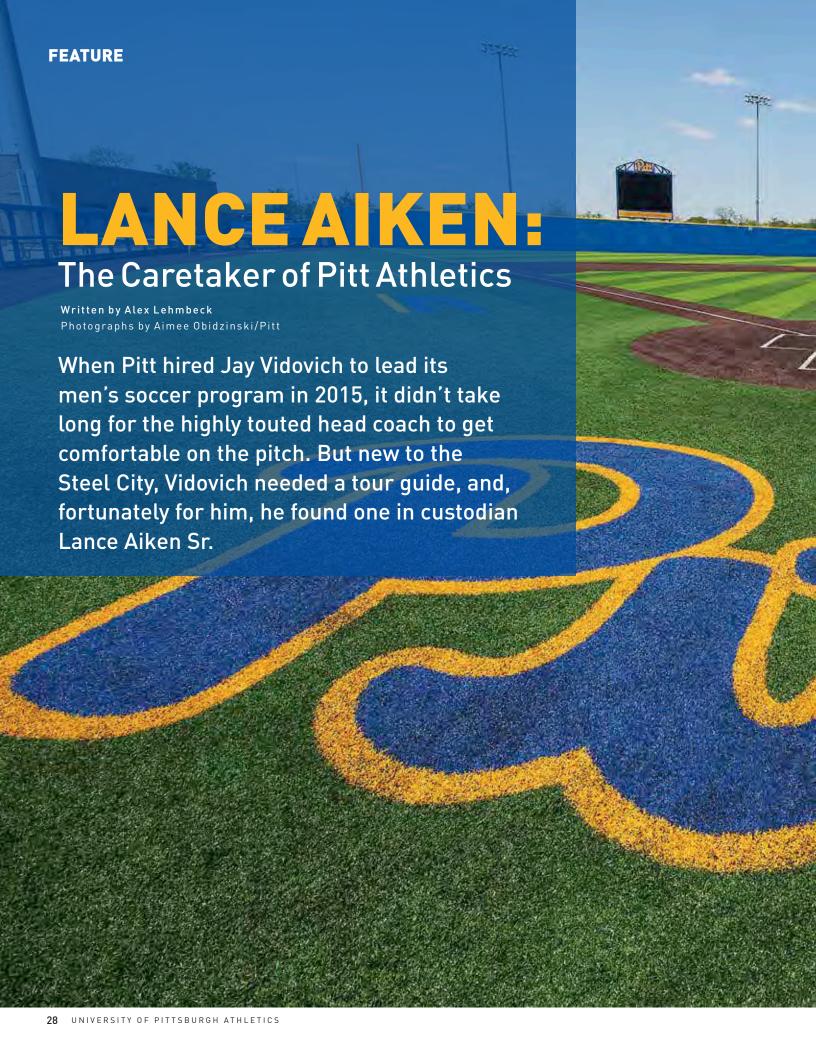
in the streets, just like there were in 1967. But Gamble sees hope in more efforts for inclusion, like USA Swimming's annual National Diversity Select Camp, which funds a week of training and education for minority athletes. He cheers when big names like Simone Manuel, Jack LeVant and Maritza McClendon are on top of leaderboards and world record lists.

are demonstrations over racial injustice

One day, Gamble met fellow New Jerseyan Cullen Jones, the first African American swimmer to win Olympic gold and silver medals (2012) for the United States. The two bantered about how rare they were in the water growing up, and Jones said he was grateful to Gamble for helping to pioneer the way for people who look like him.

Thanks for going in first. **?**







s Pitt Athletics has undergone changes in staff, facilities and athletes, Aiken has remained. When he first arrived at Pitt, the athletics department assigned him to work at Pitt Stadium. The venue was demolished in 1999, and he began working in Trees Hall, where he mostly cleaned the Pitt swimming facilities.

He went on to maintain the Graduate School of Public Health, Fitzgerald Field House, the chancellor's office in the Cathedral of Learning and the School of Dental Medicine. Finally, Aiken settled back into athletic facilities, where he's remained for the past six and a half years. He's cleaned "just about every sport's locker rooms" in his time here.

"I've covered them all," Aiken said.

Members of the Pitt community said they have appreciated Aiken's time and work in Pittsburgh. The impact he's made from countless positive interactions extends from the people inside the Petersen Sports Complex, which Aiken maintains every day, to the peak of Pitt Athletics in Director of Athletics Heather Lyke. Aiken said he missed one of Lyke's recent visits, and she noticed while going through COVID-19 protocols.

"Heather Lyke, the AD, they have to sit and do temperatures, and I was on vacation," Aiken said. "I came back, and somebody said Heather was looking, wondering where [I was] because normally they see me—happy-go-lucky Lance."

Aiken now handles all of the daytime cleaning for the Petersen Sports Complex, home to Pitt's baseball, softball, soccer and lacrosse teams. He arrives at the facility at about 7 a.m. every day, where he prepares the 12-acre complex for use in the coming morning. These responsibilities include laying down salt when it snows, scrubbing showers and bathrooms and running the walk-behind machines as well as sanitizing all touch points.

With only one other custodial worker in the building—who works the night shift—it may seem like a lot for one person to handle. But Aiken says he enjoys working alone. He doesn't have to rely on any coworkers to get

the job done the way he wants it, and both athletics staff and athletes provide all of the company he could ever need.

He said he feels a particularly upbeat atmosphere in the building when one of the teams gets an impressive win, mentioning that Pitt baseball's sweep of Florida State earlier this season even improved his own performance.

"They win a big game like that, I clean better, believe it or not," Aiken said. "Everyone's smiling and talking, then it moves on and they gotta get ready for the next one. It doesn't last too long."

As the contact person for the players and staff with any concern about the facility throughout the day, Aiken has embraced the countless interactions he has with everyone in the complex. His supervisor, Earl Vojtash, said everyone can count on Aiken to brighten up any day.

"He likes to do his job and he likes to have a good time with the students that are up there," Vojtash said. "He interacts pretty good with the students, so they have a good relationship up there."

Former Pitt pitcher Derek West, now a member of the Houston Astros organization, said Aiken's attitude represents the "gold standard" for Pitt Athletics.

"He's very professional with his work, his personality, [he] goes above and beyond his occupation and cares so much for not just me and Pitt baseball but for every sport Pitt has to offer," West said. "Anyone who comes in contact with him, no matter how their day has gone, immediately feels even better."

Athletics always felt like the right fit for Aiken, who played basketball for Burgard Vocational High School in Buffalo. He takes great pride in the success of Panther sports teams and works overtime at the sporting events

"He cares so much for Pitt baseball and for every sport Pitt has to offer. Anyone who comes in contact with him immediately feels even better."

-Derek West

at the facility so he can catch the teams' games.

While his typical workdays end at about 4 p.m., Aiken usually works as late as midnight on gamedays. Before the event, he sets up tables and cleans the press boxes and visiting locker rooms. He usually monitors the bathrooms during the game, allowing him opportunities to catch the action on the field between checks. His favorite team to watch by far is men's soccer—a sport that he used to never pay attention to but now calls "electrifying."

"I got a hell of a lot of respect for those guys that play soccer," Aiken said. "I didn't care about soccer or softball, but now I'm into it. But I like soccer the best."

That affinity for the pitch stems from some of the relationships he's built with the soccer staff. Vidovich said the two quickly got to know each other, aided by a mutual respect for each other's work.

Aiken also serves as a mentor to the athletes, and his advice became especially useful during one situation with a young soccer player. Vidovich said the young man had lots of talent but also had some behavioral issues, and Aiken helped the coach see the player's perspective after a questionable incident during a match.

"The first thing Lance did was he came over to me and said, 'Let him enjoy the win, enjoy the win and don't kill him," Vidovich said. "Kind of just like, 'Be patient there."

iken's connection to the soccer team has given him an opportunity to interact with athletes from around the world, as both the men's and women's rosters recruit heavily outside of the United States. He said he hasn't had a language barrier issue with the players from abroad but has noticed one difference between them and the American-born students.

"You know what I've learned? [It's] funny. They like to use a lot of cologne," Aiken said. "That's exactly what I've learned. To be totally honest, they love their cologne. For whatever reason."

Aiken's favorite memory from his time at Pitt came at a nearly sold-out soccer game. He couldn't remember which game it was, but Aiken said so many excited fans surrounded the team that a group of employees had to form a "human fence" to get the team from the locker room onto the field. Amid the chaos, Aiken turned to his right and couldn't believe who stood next to him as part of the chain—Chancellor Patrick Gallagher.

"It was just amazing that I saw him right next to me," Aiken said. Those small details from his everyday interactions are Aiken's favorite part of the job. He often calls former athletes completely out of the blue on any given day, checking how they're doing in whatever phase of their work or athletic career they currently face.

"Anytime I can see someone further their education, I'm happy. Get a good job, I'm happy," Aiken said. "Anything these kids do—new car, you name it. I'm happy for them. It makes me happy to see it. They come back, they visit me: 'Where's Lance?'"

Aiken said the appreciation the players show for him makes the job worth it, forming connections that last well beyond their four years at Pitt.

"It means the world, it makes me wanna come. It's a great thing," Aiken said. "Because they appreciate you more. Something's wrong, I take care of it."

West said he doesn't think Aiken realizes the profound impact he has on the players he interacts with, including the impact he had on West himself. The professional pitcher said he'll never forget the memories of Aiken repeatedly asking him about his day, how his injury rehabilitation went and reminding him that he "was going to make it."

"My first couple years at Pitt weren't easy, and it would have been easy to think negatively," West said. "But Lance just being who he is, someone who was willing to talk and crack a joke here or there, and someone who always checked in on how I was doing felt great. And I'll forever be thankful for him." •

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APERFECT ATCH

Written by Adam Reger

or Lindsey and Mike Behonick, the University of Pittsburgh has been a place of new beginnings. Lindsey joined the women's volleyball team as an assistant coach in 2013, sparking a dramatic improvement. Michael came aboard as an assistant coach of the men's soccer team in 2016, kicking off a remarkable turnaround.

But neither beginning can match the one that took place when the coaches met. Mike asked for restaurant recommendations, and Lindsey, recalling the kindness of others when she was new in town, offered to show the new soccer coach around.

"So we went out to dinner a couple [of] times," she says, "and the rest just fell into place."

The couple recently celebrated their third wedding anniversary. Their son, Miles, is 15 months old.

But before it presented them with each other, Pitt offered each coach a step up in their career and a new challenge.



or Lindsey, following head coach Dan Fisher from
Concordia University Irvine, where she had played college volleyball, was a "no brainer."
Fisher was building a new culture focused on viewing the team as a family.

"Within a family, you care a lot about the people you're around constantly," says Lindsey. The team emphasized addressing "small conflicts" or little issues openly before they grew into big ones.

The team grew more close knit. As the culture changed, the team's record improved steadily, culminating in three-straight Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) championships in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

When Mike, who grew up on Long Island, New York, joined the staff of men's soccer head coach Jay Vidovich, the team hadn't won an ACC game in the four years since Pitt had joined the conference.

"We were one of the worst teams in the country five years ago and here we are having the most historic season in program history," says Mike. "We broke almost every record in the program's history, sat as the number one team in the country for almost the

entire year and made it to the 2020 College Cup, only a different bounce of the ball away from a chance to play for a national championship."

Lindsey's proudest moment of her Pitt coaching career so far is the team's run this spring in the NCAA tournament. "We started the 2020 season in the fall with two losses to Syracuse and entered the spring portion of the season knowing if we wanted to make the NCAA tournament, we had to win all our games in the spring. Our team faced

volleyball powerhouses like Utah and Minnesota and won, which led to us to the NCAA Regional Finals—the Elite Eight—for the first time in program history! Taking on Washington in hopes of advancing to the NCAA National Semifinals was something I'll never forget. Losing the match by a point was heartbreaking, but after all this team endured during the COVID-19 season, I'm truly proud to be a part of the Pitt Volleyball Program.

"Our team faced volleyball powerhouses like Utah and Minnesota and won, which led to us to the NCAA Regional Finals—the Elite Eight—for the first time in program history! Taking on Washington in hopes of advancing to the NCAA National Semifinals was something I'll never forget."

-Lindsey Behonick



t home, the Behonicks discuss training methods, recruiting and ways to connect with student-athletes. Mike might ask Lindsey about the purpose of a drill he noticed while walking by volleyball practice, wondering if it could translate to something he's been working on with his team.

Being married to a fellow coach, Mike says, means being a lifelong learner.

"We're two ambitious coaches trying to learn and grow," he says.

Their growth has been fueled by a wide range of experiences. After her collegiate career, Lindsey played volleyball professionally in Austria. Mike, a standout soccer player at American University, was drafted to Major League Soccer, where he tended goal for seven years for DC United and the New York Red Bulls. These experiences help the Behonicks to not only teach the finer points of their respective sports but also connect with the athletes they coach as individuals.

oth teams are positioned to continue their dramatic success for vears to come. With the upcoming Victory Heights development, studentathletes in both sports will enjoy state-of-the-art sports performance and training facilities, helping them to keep pace with their ACC rivals and beyond.

But people are at the heart of every team. Juggling two hectic

"We were one of the worst teams in the country five years ago and here we are having the most historic season in program history. We broke almost every record in the program's history, sat as the number-one team in the country for almost the entire year and made it to the 2020 College Cup, only a different bounce of the ball away from a chance to play for a national championship."

-Mike Behonick







"We feel very supported in Pittsburgh, even though there's no immediate family around us. We don't have blood family here, but we definitely have a Pitt family."

-Lindsey Behonick

schedules with parenthood, especially during their spring seasons, has not been easy. The Behonicks credit their head coaches and staffs for their understanding and support.

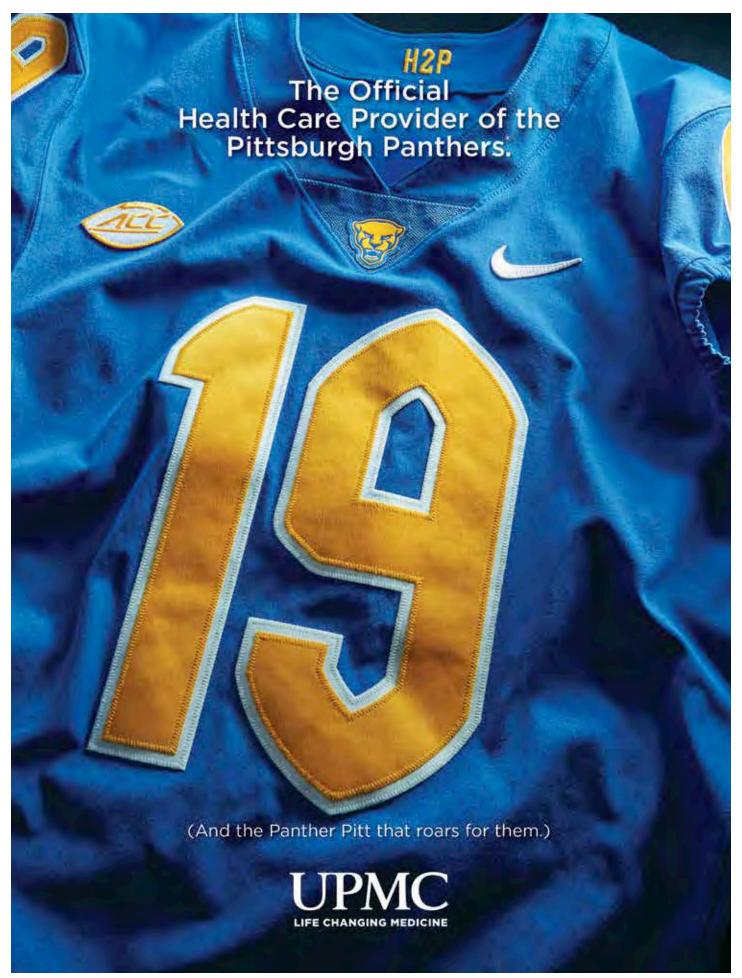
"Sometimes I might have to come in late or Mike has to dip out because our nanny has an exam," Lindsey says. "We're blessed that our staffs are like our family. And our head coaches have kids, too. They know there are sleepless nights; maybe you have to take your child to a doctor's appointment during a lunch break."

For both coaches, the pandemic has offered an unexpected opportunity to slow down. Shutdowns and restrictions

on recruiting spurred the couple to take Miles for hikes and explore the city's parks.

"This has been, in a weird way, a joyous year for Mike and I," Lindsey says. "It was really awesome to spend quality time with Mike and to have time with our son in the first year of life."

She adds, "We feel very supported in Pittsburgh, even though there's no immediate family around us. We don't have blood family here, but we definitely have a Pitt family." •





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True Blue and Gold

Written by Sam Clancy

or Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania, resident and Pitt alumnus Roberto Croce, the connection to the University remains strong. He learned in the classroom and on the pitch, earned a leadership role on the soccer team and made friendships that have lasted a lifetime. For his professional achievements and personal contributions to the community and the University, Croce was honored in 2019 as a Varsity Letter Club (VLC) Awardee of Distinction. He shares with us why he remains a Forever Panther.



Croce and fellow Pitt soccer alumni Scott Armstrong (left) and Sam Luffy at the College Cup in North Carolina

What degree did you earn at Pitt?

I graduated in 1991 with a bachelor's degree in business.

What is your current profession?

I work for American Eagle Outfitters, a specialty apparel retailer. I lead the e-commerce business for the company.

How did your experience at Pitt prepare you for your career? My experience at Pitt taught me

discipline, teamwork and leadership.

I transferred to the University prior to my junior year and had to take summer classes during the day in order to make up some credits that I lost in transfer. At the same time, I was working in a restaurant in the evenings and training or playing soccer whenever I could fit it in. Fortunately, I knew a few guys on the team who I had played with at community college—Marc Mostinckx, Heinz Pak and Dave Stewart—as well as my roommate, Michael Blatz, who I had known growing up and who was the captain of the team. This made the transition easier, but I realized quickly that I still had to earn the respect of my teammates through my actions, both on the field and off.



Why did you choose Pitt?

I was fortunate enough to have played soccer for a great coach, mentor and friend, Greg Ceravolo, and with some great teammates at the Community College of Allegheny County [CCAC]. Through them, I was able to meet Pitt [men's soccer head] coach Joe Luxbacher, who was instrumental in helping to create the opportunity for me to play soccer at Pitt. I also had a few memorable professors, including Roberto Green and Peter Smith, who took an interest in my academic success and helped me to be named an Academic All-American at CCAC as well as to get a transfer scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh.

What is your favorite memory while at Pitt?

I will never forget my first time walking onto the field at Pitt Stadium before my first match. Having

grown up in the city, Pitt Stadium was hallowed ground, and the energy was incredible.

My father came to the States to work at the Park Schenley Restaurant in Oakland, and the University as well as Pitt athletics were always such a part of the restaurant's history. It was special for me to have had the chance to play at Pitt Stadium, just up the road from where he worked for more than 20 years.

What has been your greatest career accomplishment thus far?

I just celebrated my 25th year with American Eagle, and when I look back at how the company has grown and evolved since I started, I am proud to have played a part in helping the company get to where it is today.

Do you stay in touch with your teammates?

I definitely have tried to stay connected with a lot of the guys from our team and normally speak with them via phone, email or text regularly. I also have been able to stay close to the program through my participation with VLC



Croce (center) as a Pitt student-athlete

and helping to coordinate our men's soccer alumni weekend and match for more than 20 years, which has allowed me to meet and get to know many players from various teams and decades.

What was your best athletic moment at Pitt?

It was being named to the starting 11 for my first match at Pitt and tying UConn, which was a top-20 team at the time, in front of our home crowd

What is one piece of advice you would give current student-athletes?

Make sure that you enjoy your time at Pitt, because it goes guickly, and realize how fortunate you are to be able to play the sport you love while getting an incredible education and making friends for life.

You can achieve anything,

as long as you challenge yourself to learn and grow and be better each day.

How does it feel to watch our soccer team ascend to #1 in the country during the regular season and make a historic run in the NCAA Tournament?

continued evolution achievement of the program have been amazing to watch and be a part of! [Head coach] Jay [Vidovich] and his staff, as well as the entire team, have created an environment of pride, of success and of family. The values that Jay has built the program around are

evident in practice, in preparation, in quality of play and results. He is passionate about engaging the soccer alumni as well as the entire Pittsburgh soccer community to continue to build on a strong foundation and create excitement and support for the program.

I am proud to be part of the Pitt Soccer legacy and to be able to support the first-ever #1 ranked team and ACC champions as they continue on their journey towards a national title! 🔞



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rowing up, baseball was my go-to sport and a huge part of my life, as it always brought me joy. I was a catcher when I was younger, but as I got older, I learned how to play every position and would strive to be the best at every position. As time went on, I slowly started to become a pitcher.

After finishing my first year at my junior college, I noticed I was losing hair from my head and had no idea why. I let it go for months because I just thought it was genetics. I eventually decided to go to a dermatologist to see what was wrong. The doctor pulled hair from my head to get testing done and everything came back normal. I was so confused.

November came around, and I noticed that I had been losing weight. I started to track my macros and made sure I was eating more than ever, but my weight was still dropping, and I had no idea why.

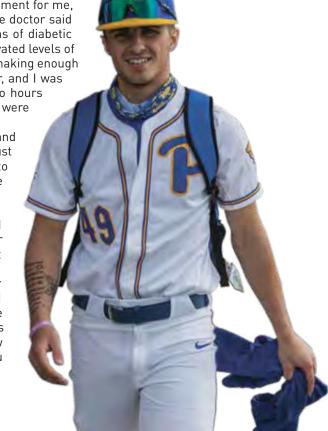
In December my weight was still down, and I was starting to get scared. I noticed that I was drinking water nonstop because my mouth was always dry to a point where I would wake up five or six times in the middle of the night to drink water and use the bathroom.

I looked up my symptoms on my phone and saw "diabetes." I thought: "There's no way. I would've been diagnosed years ago, not when I'm 19." So I went to the pharmacy and bought medicine for dry mouth because I convinced myself that I did not have diabetes. The medicine didn't work.

On January 13, 2020, I woke up feeling awful. I was throwing up, and I knew something was wrong. I called my mom to get a doctor's appointment for me, and when she called my doctor and described my symptoms, the doctor said I should go to the emergency room as I was showing symptoms of diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA). DKA happens when one's body produces elevated levels of blood acids called ketones. Ketones form when your body is not making enough or no insulin at all. I immediately went to the ER with my father, and I was admitted into the intensive care unit. I was awakened every two hours to get bloodwork done, and thought my life and baseball career were over.

I finally got out of the hospital after three long days, and everything just felt so weird. I realized that my whole life must change, and it must change now. Being an athlete, I knew how to adapt and overcome the bumps in my life. I knew how to manage changes. I knew how to switch positions in baseball, so I knew I could learn how to manage my diabetes. I did so much research on foods and how to count carbs, and honestly, getting diagnosed with type 1 diabetes (T1D) just made me a better and stronger person. It taught me that anything can happen at any time, and it also taught me that I am mentally stronger than I thought.

T1D was a blessing in disguise. It made me an overall better person. I am not embarrassed to tell anyone that I am a diabetic. I love letting people know that I am. I do not think anyone should be scared to show who they really are, whether it is having diabetes or not. Learn to love yourself and embrace who you are. Show people who you are; life will be so much better that way. Be you and do not be scared. You have one life—enjoy it.



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Etched in Stone

Since 1950, select studentathletes have been honored by having their names etched in the stones on Varsity Walk, the walkway between the Cathedral of Learning and Heinz Memorial Chapel. Joining other esteemed Pitt athletes this year will be the names of the six student-athletes who received Blue-Gold Award and Panther Award honors at the virtual celebration.

For best representing the studentathlete ideal based on academic scholarship, athletic achievement. leadership qualities and citizenship, this year's Blue-Gold Award recipients are Chinaza Ndee (volleyball), Jimmy Morrissey (football) and Jake Wentzel (wrestling).

For promoting Pitt athletics through outstanding athletic achievement, this year's Panther Award recipients are Kayla Lund (volleyball) and Rashad Weaver and Patrick Jones II (football).

Additional Recognition

Top Overall Academic Teams of the Year awards are reserved for the teams with the highest cumulative grade point average for the spring and fall

Douglas. Douglas presented the award to gymnast Olivia Miller for her extensive community involvement, including accumulating more service hours this year than any other student-athlete.

terms. This year's award recipients, for academic performance in 2020, are the men's cross country and volleyball teams.

The Bridge Builder Award is presented to the team with studentathletes who demonstrated the strongest commitment to making an impact in the community. The 2021 recipients are the gymnastics and women's lacrosse teams.

Gold Standard Teammate of the Year awards are presented to the student-athletes who most effectively inspire their team through exemplary commitment, composure and integrity. The 2021 recipients are as follows:

Baseball: Nico Samarkos Men's Basketball: Nike Sibande Women's Basketball: Gabbie Green Men's Cross Country: Josh Higgins Women's Cross Country: Ally Brunton Football: David Green Gymnastics: Katrina Coca Women's Lacrosse: Therese Pittman Men's Soccer: Valentin Noel Women's Soccer: Celia Lopez

Softball: Morgan Batesole Men's Swimming and Diving:

Judd Fishman

Women's Swimming and Diving:

Kathleen Lynch Men's Track and Field: Ade Jones-Roundtree Women's Track and Field:

Abena Atuobi

Volleyball: Kylee Levers Wrestling: Jake Wentzel Cheer: Matthew Nolan Dance: Teegan Zeh

The Gold Standard Administrator of the Year award is presented to a noncoaching staff member or members who have gone above and beyond to ensure the success and development of student-athletes. This

GOLD STANDARD: TEAMMATES OF THE YEAR NICO SAMARKOS (BASEBALL), NIKE SIBANDE (MEN'S BASKETBALL), GABBIE GREEN (WOMEN'S BASKETBALL), JOSH HIGGINS (CROSS COUNTRY), ALLY BRUNTON (CROSS COUNTRY), DAVID GREEN (FOOTBALL), KATRINA COCA (GYMNASTICS), THERESE PITTMAN (LACROSSE), VALENTIN NOEL (MEN'S SOCCER), CELIA LOPEZ (WOMEN'S SOCCER), MORGAN BATESOLE (SOFTBALL), JUDD FISHMAN (SWIMMING & DIVING), KATHLEEN LYNCH (SWIMMING & DIVING), ADE JONES-ROUNDTREE (TRACK & FIELD), ABENA ATUOB! (TRACK & FIELD), KYLEE LEVERS (VOLLEYBALL), JAKE WENTZEL (WRESTLING), MATTHEW NOLAN (CHEER), TEEGAN ZEK (DANCE)

year's recipients are the members of Pitt's Sports Medicine Team for their continued support of Pitt's studentathletes despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The James Conner Comeback of the Year award is presented to a student-athlete who, having recovered from injury, illness or hardship, returns to make a noteworthy contribution to their team's athletic success. This year's award recipient is Rashad Weaver (football).

The David Sandberg Champion **Award** is presented in memory of the former Pitt wrestler and assistant coach to the senior student-athlete who best exemplifies the qualities that Sandberg embraced: dedication to academic and athletic excellence with an unyielding spirit and passionate commitment to the improvement of the University of Pittsburgh and its surrounding communities. This year's recipient is David Yanni (baseball).

Male and Female Performance of the Year awards are presented to the student-athletes who demonstrated the most remarkable or significant performance in the past year. This year's recipients are Nino Bonaccorsi and Jake Wentzel (wrestling) and Kayla Lund (volleyball).



Newcomer of the Year awards are presented to the student-athletes who have made an immediate impact at Pitt in their first year of intercollegiate competition. Nominees can include freshmen and redshirts. This year's award recipients are Valeria Vazquez Gomez (volleyball) and Filip Mirkovic (men's soccer).

The Team Moment of the Year award is presented in recognition of a striking performance by an individual or group in a specific competition that led to a shift in momentum. This year's honor goes to the men's soccer team for achieving the first Atlantic Coast Conference Championship Final appearance in program history.

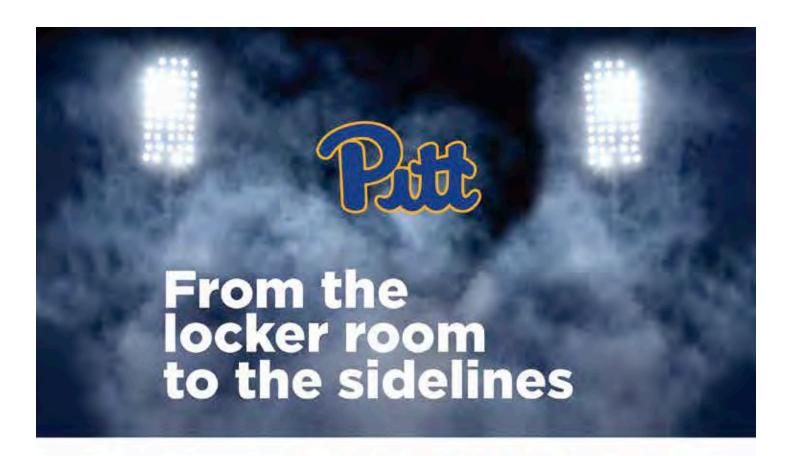
Male and Female Athlete of the Year awards are presented to standout student-athletes who have demonstrated outstanding athletic performance during competition and have been instrumental to their teams' success. This year's recipients are Blaise Vera (men's swimming and diving) and Amanda West (women's soccerl.

Team of the Year honors are reserved for the team that exemplified outstanding athletic achievement in the previous season. This year's award was presented to the men's soccer team.

The George I. Carson Graduate Fellowship is awarded annually to students who are or were affiliated with an athletics program and who demonstrate high moral character and the potential for outstanding graduate study. This year's recipient is Monica McNeil (women's track and field).

The Script Writer Award recognizes a student-athlete who best embraces Pitt Athletics' seven bridges, achieving comprehensive excellence within the classroom, on the field/court of play, within the University community and within the city of Pittsburgh. The 2021 recipient is Monica McNeil (women's track and field).

Congratulations to this year's Panthers' Choice Award recipients.



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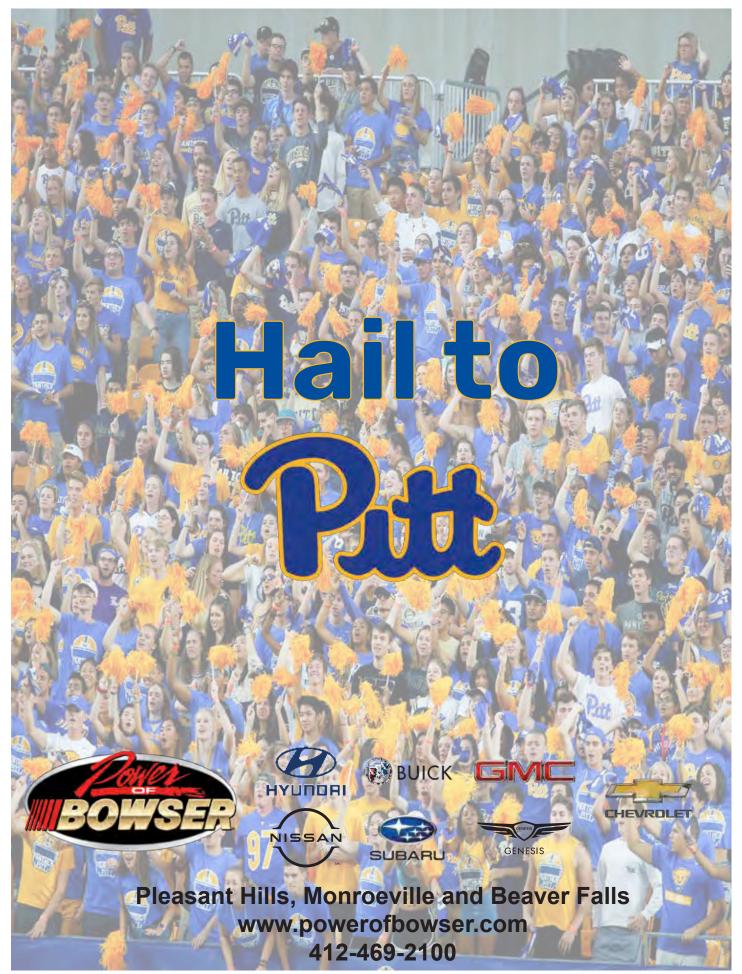
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



PITTMEMORIES

The Pitt baseball team celebrated its first and only Big East championship following a 10-4 victory over Providence in 1995. The title earned the Panthers their first NCAA Tournament berth since 1965 and secured their place as one of the finest squads in Pitt's long baseball history.









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