

H2P

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
ATHLETICS MAGAZINE
WINTER 2022-23

FINAL FOUR TIMES TWO



Valentin
Noel



Courtney
Buzzerio

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

**THERESA NUZZO'S
SPIRITED CAREER**

**TRAILBLAZER
DEBBIE LEWIS**

**HALL OF FAME
INDUCTEES**

**"SEND IT IN,
JEROME!"**

Panthers SPRING 2023 HOME SCHEDULE

LACROSSE

- 2.25 **SYRACUSE**
- 2.28 **CANISIUS**
- 3.14 **LIBERTY**
- 3.18 **VIRGINIA**
- 3.21 **PENN STATE**
- 3.26 **DUKE**
- 3.28 **YOUNGSTOWN STATE**
- 4.14 **NOTRE DAME**

ALL HOME GAMES PLAYED AT HIGHMARK STADIUM
FREE ADMISSION

BASEBALL

- 2.28 **BUCKNELL**
- 3.15 **YOUNGSTOWN STATE**
- 3.17-19 **NORTH CAROLINA**
- 3.22 **KENT STATE**
- 3.24-26 **VIRGINIA**
- 4.6-8 **NOTRE DAME**
- 4.19 **WEST VIRGINIA***
- 4.21-23 **WAKE FOREST**
- 4.28-30 **CALIFORNIA**
- 5.10 **WEST VIRGINIA**
- 5.12-14 **MIAMI**
- 5.16 **PENN STATE***

* DENOTES GAMES AT PNC PARK

SOFTBALL

- 3.24-26 **VIRGINIA**
- 4.14-16 **GEORGIA TECH**
- 4.28-30 **DUKE**
- 5.2 **ROBERT MORRIS**
- 5.5-7 **NC STATE**

PITTSBURGH **Panthers**.com/TICKETS

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UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
ATHLETICS MAGAZINE
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On the Cover:

FINAL FOUR TIMES TWO

All-Americans Courtney Buzzerio (volleyball) and Valentin Noel (soccer) helped lead the Panthers' charge during a remarkable fall sports season in which Pitt earned its highest ranking ever in the LEARFIELD Directors' Cup fall standings. See the cover story beginning on page 26.

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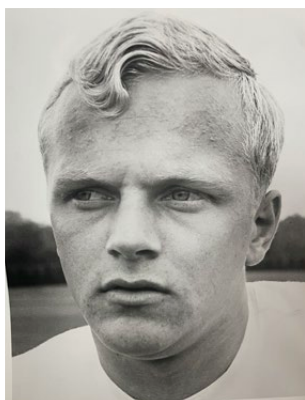
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Dear Pitt friends,

The most gratifying, most lasting successes are always accomplished through teamwork. This is true in the athletic arena, in the business world and even at home.

One of our biggest shared success stories this year so far occurred with the announcement of the LEARFIELD Directors' Cup fall season standings. The Directors' Cup serves as a national measuring stick for comprehensive excellence. It measures college athletics programs wherein points are awarded based on each institution's finish in NCAA championship competition.

I am proud to report that the University of Pittsburgh finished the fall ranked sixth out of 154 schools, our highest placement ever!

Our Panthers achieved this lofty ranking as a member of the ultracompetitive Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), which led all conferences with four programs in the Directors' Cup top 10. ACC also led all Division I

conferences with a total of 10 schools in the top 25.

Our fall sports programs combined to score 309 points—already an unprecedented overall total for Pitt. This record score was achieved by the combined efforts and excellence across five teams:

- Our men's cross country team was represented at the NCAA championships for the first time since 1994, with Luke Henseler and Jack Miller earning all-region honors to qualify.
- Women's soccer earned its first-ever NCAA tournament berth this year, advancing all the way to the Sweet 16.
- Men's soccer advanced to the NCAA College Cup for the second time in three seasons.
- Our volleyball team advanced to its second-consecutive Final Four, firmly establishing the Panthers as a national power.
- And our football program closed out the fall season with a pulsating victory over UCLA in the Sun Bowl, earning a second-consecutive top 25 finish for the first time in nearly 40 years.

None of these achievements would have been possible without the belief and support of passionate Pitt supporters like you—who believe and invest in our vision to build champions and commit to excellence in Pitt athletics.

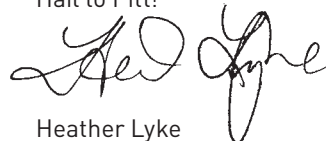
On behalf of everyone in Pitt athletics—including nearly 750 student-athletes representing 19 sports programs and spirit squads as well as the Pitt Band—I want to express my sincerest appreciation for the investment you've made in our student-athletes, facilities, sport championship funds and the Student-Athlete Success

Fund. Together, we are making our championship goals a reality.

You likely have heard me use the phrase "comprehensive excellence" numerous times during my tenure at Pitt. To reiterate our vision, it is simply not acceptable to be only "occasionally" successful or desire to win in only "certain" sports; our daily mission is to build champions and pursue excellence in everything we do.

While we are proud of our fall success, there is no finish line in the pursuit of excellence. We made history in the fall, but there are many more milestone achievements in store for Pitt athletics in the near future.

With gratitude,
Hail to Pitt!



Heather Lyke
Director of Athletics

LEARFIELD Directors' Cup Fall Standings

Top 20 (out of 154)

RANK	SCHOOL	POINTS
1.	North Carolina	382.50
2.	Stanford	330.00
3.	BYU	314.50
4.	Ohio State	313.00
5.	Syracuse	310.50
6.	PITT	309.00
	Penn State	309.00
8.	Texas	298.00
9.	Virginia	297.00
10.	Alabama	290.00
11.	Arkansas	272.00
	UCLA	272.00
13.	Washington	264.00
14.	Notre Dame	261.00
15.	Florida State	258.50
16.	Oregon	251.50
17.	Wisconsin	246.50
18.	Duke	244.00
19.	Michigan	235.00
20.	USC	228.00



**TWO NCAA
QUALIFIERS**
CROSS COUNTRY

**TWO FINAL FOUR
APPEARANCES**
MEN'S SOCCER | VOLLEYBALL



**THREE SWEET SIXTEEN
APPEARANCES**
WOMEN'S SOCCER | MEN'S SOCCER
VOLLEYBALL

**SUN BOWL
CHAMPIONS**
FOOTBALL



For the second consecutive year, an outstanding fall season for Pitt Athletics resulted in a top 10 ranking in the **LEARFIELD Directors' Cup Fall standings**.

Pitt secured 309.00 Directors' Cup points, **the most in department history**, to tie for sixth overall.

The ACC leads all Division I conferences with **10 institutions in the top-25**.

BUILDING CHAMPIONS



COMMITTED TO EXCELLENCE



COMPLIANCE CORNER

Beginning in 2023, changes to Pennsylvania's Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) law and NCAA rules create greater clarity and additional opportunities for the University of Pittsburgh Department of Athletics to support student-athlete NIL opportunities and NIL collectives. The following is a summary of what has changed.

School Support of NIL Activities

University coaches and staff **MAY NOW:**

- Inform student-athletes about potential NIL opportunities they become aware of (without further involvement)
- Provide student-athlete contact information to an interested NIL entity
- Promote student-athlete NIL activity

University coaches and staff **MAY NOT:**

- Engage in negotiations on behalf of a NIL entity or a student-athlete to secure a NIL opportunity
- Provide services (e.g., graphic design, tax preparation, contract review) unless those services are available to the general student body
- Allow student-athletes to promote their activity while participating in required athletics activities

School Involvement with Collectives and Other NIL Entities

University coaches and staff **MAY NOW:**

- Assist with fundraising through appearances, providing autographed memorabilia, etc.
- Request that donors donate funds or facilitate meetings with donors

University coaches and staff **MAY NOT:**

- Donate cash directly to collectives and other NIL entities
- Request that funds donated or raised be directed to a specific sport or student-athlete

What will the impact be?

Pitt and other institutions now have greater ability to connect their student-athletes with NIL opportunities and raise funds for collectives that support those opportunities.

Does Pitt have a collective?

Yes! Founded by transformational Pitt Athletics donor Chris Bickell, Alliance 412 is Pitt's NIL collective.

With a mission to connect Pitt student-athletes with our community, Alliance 412 offers Panther Nation the opportunity to support Pitt student-athletes as they pursue NIL opportunities to make a difference. We encourage Pitt alumni, fans, friends and business partners to consider supporting this mission.

For more information and to learn how to support NIL opportunities with Alliance 412, visit alliance412.com.

Can I work with a student-athlete to promote my business with their NIL?

Yes! With the Pitt NIL Exchange, your business is one click away from working with any of our championship teams and outstanding student-athletes.

By simply scanning the QR code below, you can register for the Pitt NIL Exchange platform free of charge. Once registered, you can immediately begin negotiating marketing opportunities with any of our 525 Pitt student-athletes! For more information, please visit pittsburghpanthers.com/nilexchange.

How do I learn more about NIL at Pitt?

For all Pitt NIL information, resources and contact information, please visit pittsburghpanthers.com/pitnil.





NAME IMAGE & LIKENESS

CONNECTING BUSINESSES WITH PITT STUDENT-ATHLETES

The Pitt Name, Image & Likeness (NIL) program was created to align student-athletes with opportunities to leverage their personal brands. As one of INFLCR's first Teamworks Elite launch partners nationwide, the program positions Pitt at the cutting edge of NIL.

- ▶ Pitt Athletics' best-in-class NIL program now offers all of Pitt's 19 sports and 500+ student-athletes an efficient and secure location to connect with local and national businesses.
- ▶ All Pitt student-athletes automatically have access to the Exchange. Businesses that register will be able to message student-athletes through the app or request a student-athlete's contact information (or that of their representative) to start a discussion about specific NIL opportunities.
- ▶ Upon finalization of an NIL deal within the Exchange, student-athletes are able to complete all compliance disclosure within the app. The app also includes a payment processing tool for the business to securely and directly pay the student-athlete with no transaction fees. All disclosure and payment data automatically report to the institution's existing compliance portal, and any payments processed using this tool will be reported on a consolidated 1099 tax form that lives in the student-athlete's app for more efficient tax reporting.



Direct Links for NIL Transactions

Athlete Profile Links put NIL in the hands of the student-athlete, empowering them with a unique link to share with companies, fans, donors and collectives, inviting them to register for their Local Exchange and work with them directly.

Student-Athlete Benefits

- ▶ A direct connection to drive interest via their profile page in the Pitt NIL Exchange
- ▶ Unique links and QR codes to instantly onboard interested parties to conduct NIL transactions compliantly and get paid without any extra fees
- ▶ A NIL link to include on social media posts and bios, business cards, rosters, and other promotional materials

Business & Fan Benefits

- Seamlessly work with their desired student-athletes while staying compliant.
- Learn more about the student-athletes' interests, hobbies, social media reach, academic interests and more.



Scan to visit the Pitt NIL Exchange

VALASEK FAMILY CLUB



Chris Valasek with his wife, Sara

Lifelong Superfan

Written by Maggie Rolichcheck

“I hacked computers for a living for a while,” says Chris Valasek.

In 2015, Valasek and Charlie Miller made national news, resulting in a recall of 1.4 million cars. After successfully hacking a Ford Escape and a Toyota Prius two years prior while plugged directly into them, the duo wanted to prove that cars were susceptible to the same attacks wirelessly. For years, Valasek and Miller worked their 9-5 tech jobs by day and spent their nights and weekends figuring out how to hack a Jeep Cherokee over cellular networks.

The story of their success was first shared in WIRED magazine. They started small by turning on the car’s fans and turning up the music as loud as it could go. Eventually, it escalated to shutting off the engine as the car was being driven at a speed of 70 miles per hour on the highway.

Today, Valasek is mostly staying out of trouble. Rather than using his knack for computers to demonstrate attacks, he and his team at Cruise LLC are finding ways to make vehicles safer. At just 40 years old, Valasek has already had an incredible career. And it all started when his older brother was accepted to the University of Pittsburgh.

Despite having grown up never owning a computer, Valasek had always wanted one. When his brother was accepted to Pitt and given a computer by their parents, he begged for one of his own. Valasek still doesn’t know how they managed to do it, but his parents were able to pull it off. He started to take classes at Pitt in high school and played with his computer in whatever spare time he had. He soon followed his brother to Pitt for college, and the native of the small town of Ford City, Pennsylvania, finally got to see what it was like to live in a big city when he moved to Oakland.

Pitt ended up being where the Valasek family came together. From the time his older brother was a first-year

For Valasek, it's about contributing now so that he can see the impact of his giving and share it with his family and friends.

student, Valasek knew that he could count on his parents, uncles and brothers to be there every Saturday for football games and on weeknights for men's basketball games. A lifelong self-proclaimed Pitt superfan, Valasek says that some of his fondest memories of the institution came from long before he or his brother enrolled.

"My first memory of Pitt was at the Fitzgerald Field House in January," he recalls. "It was 1989, and Pitt basketball beat number three Oklahoma at home. The place exploded [in] pandemonium. As a kid, you're like, whoa, people are excited about something."

Those experiences led Valasek to become more involved with Pitt men's basketball. In 2016, he made his first gift to the program. Six years later, he made the decision to commit

\$1.25 million to the men's basketball program for facility upgrades.

"I don't fit the mold of a typical donor," he admits. But "I love Pitt. I want to help the program."

The way Valasek sees it, "In the tech world, there's this concept of MVP—minimum viable product." He goes on to explain this as looking at the lofty goal you want to accomplish and breaking it down into smaller steps to get to the finish line. "My hope would be [that] this gift is the start of the MVP," he says.

Valasek recognizes that his young age contributes to the impressive nature of his contribution. After graduating from Pitt in 2005, he started giving back to the University at age 34. "I wanted to do this early," he explains. "You don't have to come from money; I don't. You don't have to own your own company; I don't. You don't have to be a CEO; I'm not."

For Valasek, it's about contributing now so that he can see the impact of his giving and share it with his family and friends. As he puts it, "Just give back to things you want

to give back to."

In recognition of his generosity, the Petersen Events Center's newest premium space, located right where the family used to sit, has been named the Valasek Family Club.

No matter where he has gone, Valasek's love of Pitt has followed him. He believes that giving back to Pitt is not only an investment in the program, it's also an investment in the city of Pittsburgh.

"When you're away, that's your flag you fly. I went to Pitt. I'm from Pittsburgh." 🐾



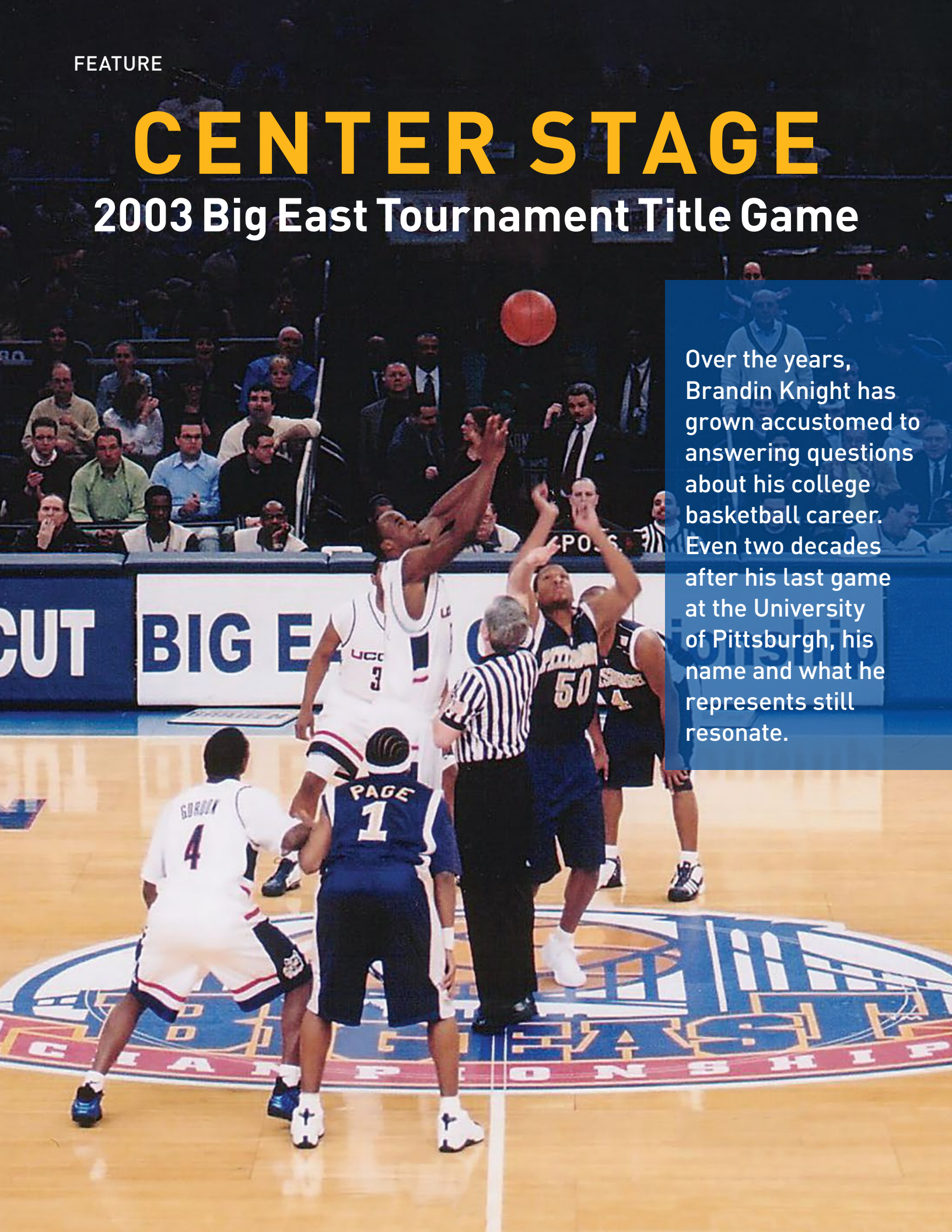
The Valasek family was on hand for the Valasek Family Club ribbon cutting in November. The club lounge is pictured at right.



FEATURE

CENTER STAGE

2003 Big East Tournament Title Game



Over the years, Brandin Knight has grown accustomed to answering questions about his college basketball career. Even two decades after his last game at the University of Pittsburgh, his name and what he represents still resonate.



nvariably, those conversations take the former All-American point guard back to one fateful night, perhaps the one that defined his time at Pitt more than any other: the 2003 Big East Conference tournament championship game. Even the most vivid memories can fade over time, becoming something murkier or more undefined, but when it comes to that game, Knight's memories are crystal clear.

"I can remember this one," he says with a laugh.

He speaks for more than just himself.

Pitt's 74-56 victory over Connecticut in the 2003 Big East Tournament title game is one of the program's most resounding achievements from its most decorated era. It was the Panthers' first time winning the hallowed event since joining the Big East in 1982. It bolstered the NCAA resume of a team with legitimate national championship aspirations. It came against a Connecticut team that was not only a rival but one of the country's premier programs. Perhaps more than anything else, it reinforced what was becoming increasingly apparent to those across college basketball: In the toughest, most rugged league in the country—both historically and at that time—Pitt was the toughest, most rugged team.

Twenty years later, it's a joyous, triumphant moment that still lives in the minds and hearts of players, coaches and fans.

"That was a big deal for us—for my family, for our team, for our program," says Ben Howland, the Panthers' head coach from 1999 to 2003. "To win that game, it was a real breakthrough moment."

The night of March 15, 2003, served as something of a conclusion for that Pitt team, but its story began well before the final horn blared at Madison Square Garden.

A middling and wayward program for much of the 1990s, the Panthers began a rapid rise in the early 2000s, shortly after Howland was hired from Northern Arizona in 1999. With players like Knight, Julius Page, Chevon Troutman, Jaron Brown, Ontario Lett and Donatas Zavackas, Howland and



Pitt had assembled not only a collection of talented players but a group with a winning pedigree and unmistakable latent toughness.

Howland harnessed and maximized those traits with a bruising physical style that quickly transformed Pitt into a force both in the Big East and nationally. In Howland's second season at Pitt, the Panthers won 19 games, their most in a decade. The following year, they went 29-6, set a program record for wins in a season, captured the Big East regular-season title, earned Howland several national coach of the year awards and finished the season ranked in the top 10. Their championship dreams were ended by a gutting overtime loss to Kent State in the Sweet 16, but even with that setback, Pitt had made it known that it was among the country's best.

"We wanted to make history," says Troutman. "During those years, we wanted to stamp Pitt as a traditionally

great powerhouse in basketball. From 2000 until 2005, my years, it was a proving point that Pitt was a high-level school, and we can compete with the best. We just didn't have a lot of the traditional winning a lot of the other schools had. That time was the

kick-starter for Pitt being memorable in modern basketball."

The success of the 2001-02 team set lofty expectations for the following season, and the Panthers were more than ready to meet them. A hyperefficient offense paired with an unforgivingly stingy defense helped Pitt finish the regular season 23-4 and ranked fifth

in the Associated Press poll. In its first season in the glistening Petersen Events Center, it won all 16 of its home games in front of raucous sold-out crowds.

For all the team had done the past two seasons, a handful of benchmarks remained unconquered. Few stood



out more than the Big East tournament championship, making the Panthers' journey to New York City that year less of a trip and more of a mission.

In each of the two previous years, they made it to the championship game only to lose once there. In 2001, they were a pleasant surprise, a squad that went 16-13 in the regular season and reeled off three wins in three days before running out of gas in the title game against a top-10 Boston College team. The following year, they fell in double-overtime to Connecticut, a game in which a 40-foot heave from Knight at the end of the first overtime bounced off the rim.

Those shortcomings motivated the players who had endured them.

"In 2003, we knew we had to win," Troutman says.

In the early rounds of the tournament, Pitt did just that, beating both Providence and Boston College by double digits to advance to yet another championship. There, a familiar foe awaited.

Just four years removed from the program's first national championship and having claimed four of the previous seven Big East tournament titles, Connecticut had firmly entrenched itself among the Big East's elite, a former afterthought that had spent the past 15 years becoming an unlikely blue blood. During that ascent, the Huskies became a measuring stick against which Pitt often fell short. Though the Panthers had won the most recent matchup, a thrilling 71-

67 victory at the Petersen Events Center just 10 days before the start of the Big East tournament, they were 6-18 in their previous 24 games against Connecticut.

"I was literally going to have to be carried off that court in a body bag before I lost that game," Page says.

"That's how I felt. There was no way I was going to be able to watch anybody else celebrate."

That desire was compounded not only by the stakes of the game but by where it was being played: in Madison Square Garden before a capacity crowd and with a national television audience watching on a Saturday night. With all those factors together, the mystique of the famed tournament became magnified.

"It's a show," Knight says. "It's like a basketball game on Broadway. We're the actors, and the outcome is the script. The lights are brighter. If you ever watch a game at Madison Square Garden, I'm not even going to say it feels like it—the lights are brighter."

It was under those lights, though, that Knight would have to play under less-than-ideal circumstances. In Pitt's semifinal victory over Boston College the previous night, the Panthers' star point guard had strained a tendon in his right ankle. Knight had experienced something similar in the tournament the previous year, when he played through a knee injury in the title game.

In the hours leading up to tip-off, he worked endlessly with team trainer Tony

“

It's a show. It's like a basketball game on Broadway. We're the actors, and the outcome is the script. The lights are brighter. If you ever watch a game at Madison Square Garden, I'm not even going to say it feels like it—the lights are brighter.”

—Brandin Knight

Salesi to try to mend the ankle, taping and re-taping it until it felt comfortable, and the pain was dulled as much as it could be. The question still lingered about whether he would be able to play, but Knight and those closest to him knew the answer.



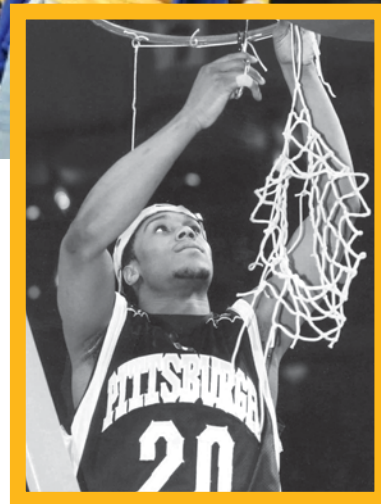
Pitt welcomed back members of the 2003 Big East Championship team for a private celebration Friday, January 27, before an on-court recognition the following day during Pitt's dramatic 71-68 win over 20th-ranked Miami.

"I felt like I was the Tin Man," Knight says. "That was the one thing—I could not miss that game. In my mind, I was telling myself that. But in my heart, I'm like 'This can't be happening again.'"

"I didn't have any doubt, just because I know Brandin so well and how tough he was," Howland says. "He wasn't going to be denied."

While the final score appeared lopsided, the game was close at a late stage, as Pitt led by only four points with about five minutes remaining. From there, though, everything changed. Despite making just two shots in that span, the Panthers ended the game on a 19-5 run, going 14 of 18 from the free throw line in the final 4:18 to build their lead and eventually seal the win. Heading into the night, Pitt was making only 63% of its free throws as a team.

The most iconic moment came in those final minutes, when Connecticut, trailing by 14 with 1:34 left to play, rolled the ball out on an inbounds pass to try to



preserve time. Out of nowhere, Knight, hobbled ankle and all, dove headfirst for the ball, collected it and called a timeout to give his team possession.

"It was instincts," says Knight, who finished the game with 16 points. "I didn't give it that much thought. Everything we had done and everything we had worked for went into that. It went into that moment. It went into us winning the championship."

As the final seconds ticked off the clock and the cheers from the Pitt faithful in attendance built, players embraced one another in euphoria. Once it ended, they were handed championship hats. They had finally done it. As Knight said after the game, the Panthers had avoided becoming the Buffalo Bills, the NFL franchise that infamously lost four consecutive Super Bowls in the 1990s.

"We finally stamped ourselves in history, and we knew that," Troutman says.

Following the game, legendary Connecticut coach Jim Calhoun, whose teams were always among the grittiest in the sport, praised Pitt as "the tougher team," a compliment Howland still fondly recalls all these years later.


With a shiny new trophy in hand, Pitt earned a number-two seed in the NCAA tournament, but the championship hopes that followed it there never materialized. The Panthers were placed in a region in which their second week of games took place in Minneapolis, not nearby Albany, New York, which Howland had hoped for. After winning their first two matchups by a combined 48 points, they lost a painfully close game in the Sweet

16 for a second-consecutive season, falling 77-74 to a Marquette team led by a sophomore guard named Dwyane Wade.

Gut-wrenching as the loss was at the time—and still is, with Wade's NBA heroics only doing so much to make the loss more palatable—that Pitt team was defined far more by its slew of successes than its small handful of missteps.

In the months after the season ended, Knight, Brown, Lett and Zavackas graduated, while Howland left to become the head coach at UCLA. The program's triumphs continued, though. Pitt won 20 or more games and made the NCAA tournament in each of the next eight seasons. In all but one of those seasons, it finished ranked in the top 20 nationally.

A single night in midtown Manhattan alone didn't make that sustained run of success possible, but it showed what an ascendant program was capable of accomplishing. And for those who were part of it, those 40 minutes still live with them.

"I'm 40 years old now, and to even think about it, it's so crazy," Page says. "I feel like I didn't cherish those times enough." 



Remembering **HENRY “MODEL T” FORD** 1931-2021



Seventy years ago this fall, the lineup for the 1953 University of Pittsburgh football team featured the program's first African American starting quarterback, Henry "Model T" Ford, who would lead the Panthers in passing, total offense and kick returns. In that era of "60-minute men" who played both offense and defense, Ford also led the team in interceptions from his defensive back position. He finished his collegiate career as a four-year letter winner (1951-54) and played two NFL seasons, one each with the Cleveland Browns and Pittsburgh Steelers. A 1955 graduate of Pitt, Ford enjoyed an accomplished business career and was highly impactful in community endeavors. He died in June 2021 at the age of 89.



From left: Lou Palatella, Henry Ford and Coach Lowell "Red" Dawson



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Former Fullback Leads Innovative Auction Website



Written by Josh Rowntree

Kellen Campbell's route to success has been unconventional, but it has led the former University of Pittsburgh fullback to the top of one of the region's most unique retail businesses.



Campbell, a West Allegheny High School grad who played for the Panthers from 2001 to 2005, found his way onto the Pitt football roster almost by happenstance.

A close friend of former Panthers quarterback and fellow West Allegheny alum Tyler Palko, Campbell tagged along on a recruiting trip of Palko's in 2001.

Luke Palko—Tyler's younger brother—was also on the trip and half-jokingly told Campbell that he should play at Pitt.

Campbell, a standout wrestler who finished eighth in Pennsylvania as a high school junior, had not given football significant thought at that point. But Luke Palko began to push him into it, even telling then Pitt special teams coach Bob Ligashesky that Campbell wanted to play.

In a somewhat spur-of-the-moment decision, Campbell confirmed to Ligashesky that he did want to play at Pitt.

Ligashesky talked to then Pitt head coach Walt Harris, who called Campbell a couple of days later and offered him a preferred walk-on spot.

And just like that, somewhat unexpectedly, Kellen Campbell was a Pitt Panther.

The football career that followed for Campbell was a bit of a ride. He bounced from safety to linebacker to fullback, eventually replacing four-year starter Lousaka Polite as the lead blocker in Pitt's offense. He started as a junior, helping the Panthers get to the Fiesta Bowl while still not on scholarship.

When Campbell was on the verge of earning his free ride, Harris left Pitt, and Dave Wannstedt took over as head coach.

"Coach Wannstedt says, 'Look, you're going to have to earn it,'" Campbell remembers. "But if you earn it, we'll absolutely give you a scholarship."

Campbell did just that, all while switching academic paths from engineering, which he had been studying, to business.

In late September of his senior season, Campbell dislocated his



M&C Discount founders Kellen Campbell (left) and Shawn Allen



foot during a kickoff against Rutgers, ending his football career.

With football in the rearview mirror, he decided to spend a term studying abroad in Australia.

“It was a really cool experience,” he says. “I met a lot of great people and got to do some interesting things.”

Upon his return, Campbell got his MBA from Pitt and then set out for a career on Wall Street. He worked for a company that was owned by Goldman Sachs for a year before realizing that finance wasn’t a great fit.

“When football is over and school is over, it’s a complete change,” he says. “I had been playing football and going to school for as long as I could remember. All of a sudden, that ends one day, and you have to figure out which direction you’re going to go and, quite frankly, what you’re good at.”

He surveyed his options as the country’s economy was in the 2008 recession.

“There weren’t many opportunities at that time,” he says.

Campbell got a job as a sales rep for a logistics company and had success. He was contacted numerous times by GENCO, a third-party logistics company, and that began to open the door to his wildly successful present.

“GENCO had just acquired all of the liquidation for Amazon,” Campbell says. “They had all of these different facilities throughout the United States, and they needed to develop the customer base. That’s why I was brought on.”

“

I wasn’t the most athletic guy—I wasn’t even the smartest guy. But I was smart enough and knew that if I kept coming back and grinding that it was going to take off.”

– Kellen Campbell

While at GENCO, Campbell met two very important people: his future wife, Nicole, and his future business partner, Shawn Allen.

Campbell and Allen kicked around an idea for their own liquidation retail business in the region, but nothing initially came of it.

Then, in 2015, GENCO was acquired by FedEx Corporation, and Campbell went back to a career in sales. He was on the road every week, and he and Nicole wanted to start a family.

So Campbell made his biggest and boldest career move yet: He called up Allen, and they put their idea into motion, figuring out a business plan together.

They bought what Campbell describes as a “really, really ugly warehouse” in Washington, Pennsylvania. They fixed it up, and soon M@C Discount was in business.

“We are a retail auction liquidator,” he explains. “We buy general retail liquidation from retailers—customer returns, overstocks, end of season, what have you. We buy it by the truckload, [then] we bring it into a warehouse and have a scan team that breaks everything down. We sell it by the piece through our auction website.”

Campbell and Allen made their first online auction sale in March of 2018. But making it a success took time.

“We were a true startup and had no money,” he says.

Larger-ticket items like refrigerators and hot tubs were not initially listed on the site, just smaller, less-expensive units.

At M@C Discount, unlike similar sites, auctions start for \$1, with no reserve pricing and no cost to join the site and bid. Whatever the item sells for is what the buyer pays.

“Especially early on when we didn’t have many bidders—and I mean, some of this stuff can be thousands of dollars—we were really sweating it out, hoping that we weren’t selling things at a loss,” he says.

Then, in March 2020, the



M@C Discount now has a dozen locations and more than a million square feet of warehouse space, sells between 15,000 and 20,000 items per day and has more than 700 employees.

COVID-19 pandemic shut down commerce and brought life as we know it to a halt.

M@C Discount was forced to close its retail doors but appealed to the state, arguing that it was capable of being an online business with safe pickup options at its warehouse. The state agreed, and those larger-ticket items began to pop up on the website.

They sold—and sold fast. And M@C Discount's business boomed.

"We were fortunate enough that everyone was at home and that there's an entertainment factor to bidding," Campbell says. "Plus, people couldn't get stuff because of supply chain issues. We were getting a lot of eyeballs. It just exploded from there.

Now, it's pretty wild."


M@C Discount now has a dozen locations and more than a million square feet of warehouse space, sells between 15,000 and 20,000 items per day and has more than 700 employees.

"Everybody loves to get a good deal, and when they get a good deal, they tell everybody about it," Campbell says.

Campbell's success has been built on taking a chance when opportunity presents itself, and he attributes much of his current achievement to his time in the blue and gold.

"Toughness can take you a long way," says Campbell, now a proud father of two. "And if you're intelligent and make good decisions, that can take you a long way, too.



"I wasn't the most athletic guy—I wasn't even the smartest guy. But I was smart enough and knew that if I kept coming back and grinding that it was going to take off." 

HALL OF FAME INDUCTION

It was a night to remember at the 2022 University of Pittsburgh Department of Athletics Hall of Fame induction ceremony. The event, held on September 30, 2022, at Acrisure Stadium, honored the nine inductees for 2022 as well as three inductees from 2020.



The Hall of Famers who were honored:

Keisha Demas (women's track and field)

Russ Grimm (football)

Larry Harris (men's basketball)

Rickey Jackson (football)

Jerome Lane (men's basketball)

Debbie Lewis (women's basketball)

Angela Lopez (swimming)

Ann Marie Lucanie (volleyball)


Jerry Richey (men's track and field)

Donna DeMarino Sanft (gymnastics, coach, administrator)

Pat Santoro (wrestling)

Rande Stottlemeyer (wrestling coach, posthumous)

Sanft, Lucanie and Santoro were inducted in 2020 but honored this year after they were unable to attend last year's ceremony.

Established in 2018, the Pitt Athletics Hall of Fame recognizes and honors student-athletes, coaches, teams and other members of the University of Pittsburgh community who have performed with distinction and been instrumental in the success of Pitt athletics. 



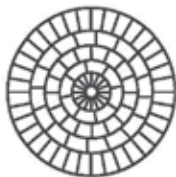
Front row, left to right: Donna Sanft, Debbie Lewis, Angie Lopez, Pat Santoro, Regina Stottlemeyer (accepting on behalf of her late husband, Rande), Jerry Richey, Ann Marie Lucanie and Russ Grimm
Back row, left to right: Larry Harris, Rickey Jackson, Jerome Lane and Keisha Demas

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There's
No Place
Like **Pitt**

Brianna Kiesel-Acker's biggest goals in life, in a major way, have centered around the place she loves most: the University of Pittsburgh. "I bleed blue and gold for a reason," says Kiesel-Acker, one of the top players in Pitt women's basketball history.

But Kiesel-Acker's journey back to the place where she set records and took the Panthers to new heights on the court is one that involved a circuitous route and some massive personal adversity along the way.

It's also a ride that has shaped the 29-year-old into the person and coach she is today.

Kiesel-Acker grew up in Utica, New York. A talented guard, she popped up on the radar of several major college programs, including Pitt's, as a high school sophomore.

It was during that time that she met former Pitt head coach Agnus Berenato and her staff. Berenato wanted Kiesel-Acker's talents, as did many others.

But during the third game of her junior season at Thomas R. Proctor High School, everything changed. Kiesel-Acker broke a bone in her left hand between her wrist and thumb. The injury was costly. Many programs broke contact with her and stopped recruiting her. But not Berenato.

"Pitt stayed loyal," she recalls. "In return, they got my loyalty back."

Kiesel-Acker committed to the Panthers and made an immediate

impact when she joined the team.

As a first-year student-athlete, she scored 13.6 points per game, earning a spot on the Big East Conference All-Freshman Team. The following season, she led the Pitt squad with nearly 15 points per game, making her way onto the All-Big East Third Team.

Then Pitt made a major move, shifting from the Big East to the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). Berenato also was relieved of her duties. But Kiesel-Acker kept her commitment to Pitt, and it paid off.

She scored 16.4 points per game as a junior. Pitt went 11-20 that season, but a foundation had been laid and centered around the dynamic guard who had started in all but two games in her career.

Kiesel-Acker then got an opportunity to expand her horizons. Through the Women's Basketball Coaches Association So You Want to Be a Coach program and the Coach for College program, both facilitated by Pitt, she traveled to Vietnam before her senior season, gaining



some experience coaching children and teaching math overseas.

That experience sparked her love of coaching and instruction. And what followed turned that spark into a fire.

Kiesel-Acker returned to Pittsburgh, and her game took off. She was named to the All-ACC First Team after scoring 18.4 points per game and leading Pitt to the NCAA tournament, where she went down swinging, scoring a career-high 32 points in Pitt's loss to fifth-seeded Tennessee in the second round.

"It took until my senior year to make the NCAA tournament," she says. "My first three years were a little bit of a

struggle. So I know what it's like to be down and out, and I know what it's like to be successful.

"I've been in the trenches, but I also know what that sunshine feels like, too."

After her senior season, the sunshine was bright on Kiesel-Acker. She graduated from Pitt with bachelor's degrees in administration of justice and legal studies and a certificate in communication, was Pitt's all-time leader in minutes played and had scored 1,938 points in 122 games. And soon the WNBA came calling.

Kiesel-Acker was selected 13th overall in the 2015 WNBA Draft by the Tulsa Shock, joining Shavonte Zellous as the second Pitt player ever to be drafted into the WNBA.

She played in 58 games with three teams in the WNBA and then pursued a longer professional career overseas, playing for teams in Israel, Hungary, Sweden and Poland.

"I liked every place for a different reason," she says. "I loved being able to travel all over the world."

During her second stint in Hungary, Kiesel-Acker played on a pro team with six teammates who were, at the time, all under the age of 18. She realized that the fundamentals were there for the young players, but they had yet to discover many of the advanced nuances of the game.

"Getting a chance to break that down and talk to them individually and as a team, to get them all on the same page, was huge," she says. "Having that opportunity to talk to those kids, even though they were my teammates—it was still my job to coach them up."

Along the way, she met Corwin Acker II, got engaged, and decided it was time to transition out of her playing career and into a coaching role.

"I was getting married and wanted to be home," she says.

When Pitt women's basketball head coach Lance White had an opening on his staff and called up Kiesel-Acker to

“

**I don't think I ever
have to sell Pitt,
because I am Pitt.”**

– Brianna Kiesel-Acker

gauge her interest, it was a no-brainer for both parties.

"I understood that this is my dream job," she says. "I knew that, at the end of the day, if I could ever have an opportunity to come here and coach, I would do it in a heartbeat."

Kiesel-Acker moved back to Pittsburgh during the spring of 2021 and began to plan her wedding for that fall. There was no doubt in her mind as to where the wedding would take place.

"When I came on my official recruiting visit, I knew I wanted to be here," she says. "This felt like home for me. I told my parents ... 'I'm going to go to Pitt and do three things: get married at Heinz Chapel, get my name on the Varsity Walk and make the NCAA tournament.'"

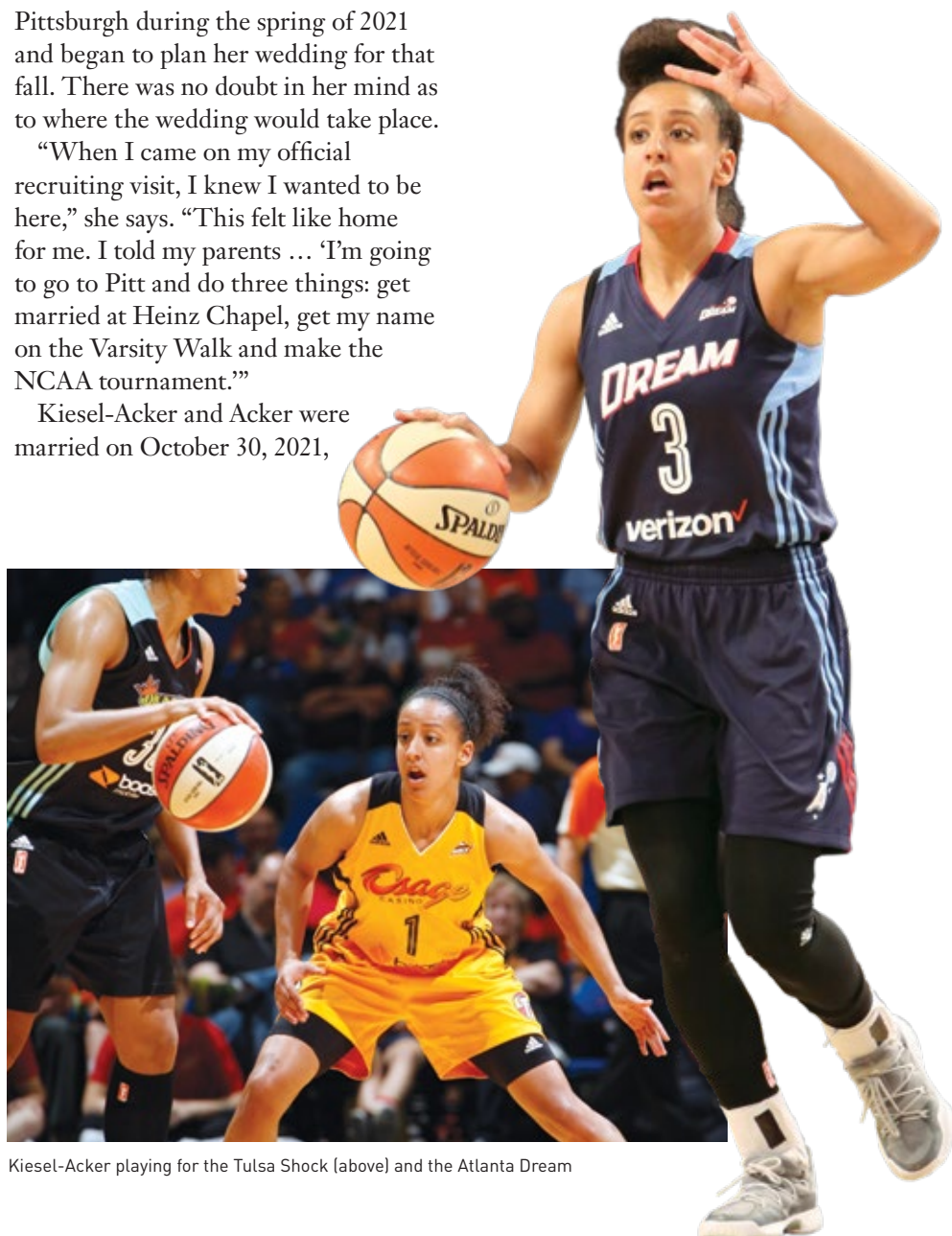
Kiesel-Acker and Acker were married on October 30, 2021,

at Heinz Memorial Chapel, just steps away from where her name is etched on the Varsity Walk and just down the hill from where she helped to turn Pitt's program around—check, check and check.

She also, at that point, was around 25 weeks pregnant.

"You make a move, you get a new job and you have a baby," she says. "I decided to do them all at once. I would not recommend [it]."

Life was going well for Kiesel-Acker. She had secured her dream job, had her dream wedding and was preparing to welcome a baby boy in a few months.



Kiesel-Acker playing for the Tulsa Shock (above) and the Atlanta Dream

That's when life got complicated.

Kiesel-Acker was getting set to coach her first game, Pitt's season opener on November 10 against Radford, when she experienced complications with her pregnancy. Three weeks later, on December 1, 2021, she gave birth to Corwin Acker III at 30 weeks.

The physical toll on her and her son, and the attention he required while fighting to survive, kept Kiesel-Acker off the bench for the entirety of the 2021-22 season, her first as a coach.

"He was in the neonatal intensive care unit for 51 days," she says. "It's a lot. There's a lot on you mentally, physically and emotionally because there's a lot you can't do."

"But coming here, having support of the staff here—they came to visit the baby in the NICU, the team was here, they were supportive. And when I came back, they welcomed me with open arms. I will always be indebted [to them] for that."

Pitt's women's basketball staff stepped up for Kiesel-Acker and her family, offering to bring food, pick up groceries and run errands for them as she recovered. And that backing extended into the entire Pitt athletic department and community.

"This is a family environment, and that's why I love Pitt," she says. "We're all family, and everyone supports each other. I got copious amounts of text messages, not only from the staff but from everyone around the University."

Now, Kiesel-Acker and her 1-year-old son are healthy and thriving. He is figuring out life's earliest stages, and she feels a lot like that first-year student who arrived on Pitt's campus with big goals in 2011, absorbing as much as she can while also making a major impact on Pitt's team.

Kiesel-Acker's story is one of perseverance, passion and the impact that the Pitt community can have on a person's life, even long after they take off their uniform for the final time.

And now the mom, coach, wife and Pitt graduate wants to find and develop a new generation of Panthers while also helping them to fall in love with her favorite place on earth.

"I don't think I ever have to sell Pitt, because I am Pitt," she says. "I love Pitt. I dream about Pitt, and I talk about Pitt all the time."

"At Pitt, I was able to come in and grow. I came in as a girl and left as a woman." 🍷



Brianna Kiesel-Acker and Corwin Acker II



Corwin Acker III



Kiesel-Acker coaching

FINAL FOUR TIMES TWO

The fall of 2022 will go down as one of the greatest seasons in Pitt athletics history due, in large part, to the extraordinary success of the volleyball and men's soccer programs.

Both programs reached the national semifinals in their respective seasons, placing Pitt on a pedestal as the only athletic department in the last three seasons to send both a volleyball team and soccer team to the Final Four in the same season. The unprecedented runs of success by the two programs can be attributed to one main factor: a culture of winning that has permeated Pitt athletics.



VOLLEYBALL



First Team All-American Serena Gray celebrates a point against BYU in the second round of the NCAA tournament in the Petersen Events Center.

The University of Pittsburgh volleyball program enhanced its already extraordinary legacy of success in 2022, setting numerous records en route to a second-consecutive NCAA tournament Final

Four appearance. From milestone victories to unprecedented individual success, the 2022 Pitt Panthers delivered a season for the record books while cementing the program as one of the very best the sport has to offer.

The winningest program in Division I over the last five seasons, Pitt secured its fourth Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) championship in the last six seasons, going 17-1 in ACC play, including a perfect 9-0 record at the Fitzgerald Field House. The team finished with a 31-4 record—the most single-season wins since 1990—recording program records for the most wins over both top-five (three) and top-10 (five) ranked opponents, including two of the highest ranked wins in program history (number two Louisville and number one Wisconsin). It also became the first program in Pitt athletics history to record five top-10 wins in a single season, taking down Wisconsin, Louisville, Georgia Tech, BYU and Ohio State.

Continuing their dynastic run with a second-straight NCAA Final Four appearance, the Panthers faced a gauntlet of volleyball blue bloods on the way, taking down Colgate, BYU and Florida. Pitt became the first program in the history of the tournament to upset the defending national champions on their home court in an Elite Eight match, taking

down Wisconsin in five sets in front of a raucous crowd in Madison, Wisconsin.

Individually, the Panthers tied a program record with four All-America selections from the American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA): Courtney Buzzerio (first team), Serena Gray (first team), Valeria Vazquez Gomez (second team) and Rachel Fairbanks (third team). It was the first time Pitt has had multiple first-team All-American selections after Kayla Lund became the first Panther to achieve the honor in 2021.

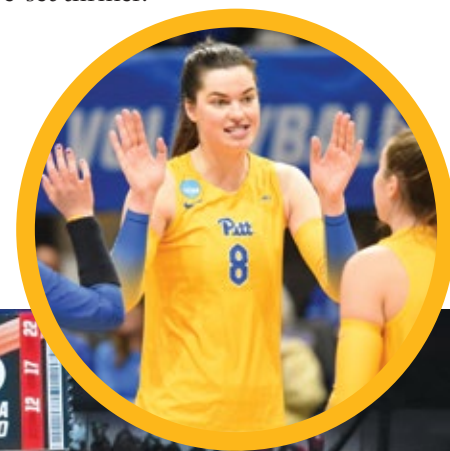
Buzzerio finished with 461 kills, the second most by a Panther in a single season in the modern scoring era, just six behind Stephanie Williams' record-setting 467 kills in the 2016 season. Buzzerio set a program record with 82 kills in Pitt's Final Four run, the most kills ever recorded by a Panther in the NCAA tournament.

Fairbanks became the first non-senior to earn a spot on an AVCA

All-America team in program history, earning third-team status as a sophomore. She delivered two triple-doubles this season, becoming the first Panther in the modern scoring era to do so and the first ever to do so in an NCAA tournament match when she posted 10 kills, 28 assists and 13 digs in Pitt's victory over BYU.

The Pitt volleyball community showed its love throughout the whole season, setting a record for the largest average attendance for a season at 1,726. Pitt set a program record for the largest attendance at a conference match when 3,556 fans packed the Petersen Events Center to watch the Panthers take down Georgia Tech in a five-set thriller.

First Team All-American Courtney Buzzerio



Pitt's volleyball team celebrates advancing to the NCAA Final Four on the court of the UW Field House in Madison, Wisconsin.

MEN'S SOCCER



Celebration ensued at Ambrose Urbanic Field after Pitt secured its second trip to the College Cup in program history with a 1-0 overtime victory over Portland in the NCAA Tournament Quarterfinals on December 3, 2022.

Jay Vidovich now looks back and jokes about his first couple of seasons building the University of Pittsburgh men's soccer program.

Vidovich, who just completed his massively successful seventh season as head coach, likes to say that the crowds back then consisted of merely "a couple of parents and a dog."

How times have changed.

Pitt is now a national power in the sport and proved that again in the 2022 season, finishing 12-5-5 and making a second run in three years to the NCAA College Cup in Cary, North Carolina.

Along the way, the crowds grew at Ambrose Urbanic Field, culminating with a raucous horde of 2,200 blue-and-gold-clad fans who cheered Pitt on in its 1-0 win over Portland to get to the national semifinals.

But to get to that unforgettable evening, these Panthers had to overcome plenty, and perseverance became the driving force behind Pitt's eventual success.

The Panthers won five of their first six matches but then experienced a long string of injuries that forced some of the team's top players out of the lineup.

The result was that Pitt failed to pick up a win in its five matches between September 19 and October 10, 2022.



Filip Mirkovic

As the team slumped, however, it also began to develop chemistry among a variety of players and gained a much-needed never-say-die attitude.

Pitt closed the season by going 7-2-2, including a dramatic upset of undefeated number-one-ranked Kentucky in the College Cup quarterfinals.

Offensively, the Panthers were paced by their very own “French connection” in Valentin Noel and Bertin Jacquesson, who combined for 19 goals and 46 points.

It was Jacquesson, a native of Lorrez-le-Bocage, France, who scored the heroic 78th-minute goal at Kentucky, doing so with Pitt playing down a man due to a red card. Noel scored the game winner against Portland in extra time.

Noel, originally from Niort, France, finished his career as one of the most decorated players in program history. He earned All-American status twice while scoring the second-most goals




Valentin Noel was drafted 20th overall by Austin FC after earning All-America honors.

in Pitt history. In the classroom, his hard work generated a spot on the United Soccer Coaches Scholar All-American first team. Jacquesson was selected to Top Drawer Soccer’s Postseason Best XI third team and was ranked by the publication as the nation’s 23rd best player. Three other Panthers earned All-Atlantic Coast Conference status.

Following the season, Jacquesson signed a Generation adidas contract and was taken 16th overall by Real Salt Lake in the 2023 MLS SuperDraft. Noel was selected 20th overall by Austin FC. Fifth-year captain Jackson Walti—who began his career as a walk-on and then started 98 matches—was picked 56th overall, also by Austin FC.

The three drafted players are the most in program history for Pitt and mark the first time since 1985 that any Pitt program has had two players selected in the top 20 picks of their

sport’s professional draft.

Ending the season ranked fourth in Top Drawer Soccer’s final national rankings, the Panthers have proved that their “dog days” are long gone. 



Bertin Jacquesson became the highest-drafted Panther in program history being selected 16th overall by Real Salt Lake.



The Panthers huddle ahead of their NCAA third-round matchup against top-ranked Kentucky.

Additional Fall Highlights

MEN'S TRACK AND FIELD

The University of Pittsburgh men's cross country squad had one of its most successful campaigns in recent memory this past season, with a pair of runners qualifying for the NCAA cross country championships for the first time in program history.

Jack Miller and Luke Henseler became the first Pitt men to qualify for the championship meet since Mike Umbleby in 1994. Miller earned his first trip to the championship meet after securing a seventh-place finish at the NCAA Mid-

Atlantic Regionals, while Henseler punched his ticket with a 13th-place finish. Miller and Henseler helped the Panthers to secure fifth place at the regional meet, tying the best finish in program history. In the men's 10K race at the NCAA championships, Henseler was able to collect the top finish for Pitt as he crossed the finish line in 195th place, while Miller finished 204th among a talented field.



Additional Fall Highlights

WOMEN'S SOCCER

The University of Pittsburgh women's soccer team set program records for overall wins (14) and Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) wins (five) and qualified for both the ACC championship and NCAA tournament for the first time in program history in 2022. The Panthers reached the Sweet 16 in their first NCAA tournament appearance after knocking off Buffalo 1-0 in the first round and Georgetown 2-1 in the second round. The team also set single-season program records for points (138) and goals (47). The Panthers finished the year ranked 12th in the United Soccer Coaches rankings.

First-year defender Katie Zailski and senior midfielder Landy Mertz represented Pitt on the 2022 United Soccer Coaches NCAA Division I Women's Atlantic All-Region teams, with Zailski being named to the second team and

Mertz being named to the third team. The duo also earned All-ACC honors, as Mertz was named to the third team and Zailski was named to the All-Freshman Team. Caitlyn Lazzarini set the program's career wins record by a goalkeeper with 22, while Amanda West set the program's career assists record with 22.

The Panthers also excelled academically in 2022. Lazzarini, Mertz, Bri Hilsenteger, Ashley Moon, Sarah Schupansky and Emily Yapple were all named to the 2022 Academic All-District Team, selected by College Sports Communicators. Mertz went on to earn Academic All-America second team recognition from the organization.



A Victory in the Sun

The University of Pittsburgh Panthers' last-second victory over UCLA at the 2022 Tony the Tiger Sun Bowl was a game for the ages.

The team thrilled a national television audience and a pulsating crowd with a 37-35 win over nationally ranked UCLA. The heroes were many, but a few stood out: substitute quarterback Nick Patti, who led the frantic last-second scoring drive; running back Rodney Hammond Jr., who scored two crucial touchdowns; an opportunistic Pitt defense that intercepted four Bruins passes; and, of course, placekicker Ben Sauls, who nailed the game-winning 47-yard field goal with just seconds left in the game.

Not since the legendary Dan Marino passed to John Brown in the iconic 1982 Sugar Bowl has a Pitt postseason game ended so dramatically.

"What a football game," said Pat Narduzzi, Chris Bickell '97 Head Football Coach. "We talked about going out there—we were down a few guys—just find a way to win a football game. Just get it done. It was a great way to finish for our kids."



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10



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Trailblazer: Debbie Lewis

Written by Josh Rowntree



pend just a few minutes with Debbie Lewis, and you'll have a smile on your face. And that's exactly what she's wanted out of life.

Lewis, a women's basketball player at the University of Pittsburgh from 1977 to 1981, was an

instrumental figure in the program's early days. But to get there, her journey and skills were crafted with the help of some people she still holds near and dear.

Growing up in Philadelphia, Lewis would tag along with her brothers to the playground and jump in on pickup basketball games, typically as the only girl. But the boys were accepting and treated her as an equal, and Lewis began to learn how to play the game against those who were bigger and stronger than she was.

"My one brother played some football, and he said, 'I'm going to use you. You run with the ball, and I'll work on my tackling,'" she says.

"I just fell in love with basketball."

By the time she was in eighth grade, Lewis started to hear people talk about how good she was at the game. Shortly after that, she began to observe some of her high school teammates making

it to college and excelling on the court. She knew that she wanted to follow in their footsteps.

"All I wanted to do was play basketball," she says. "So, my mindset was, you tell me what I need to do to play basketball, and I'll do it. First, I needed decent grades, so I did what I needed to do."

Sam Johnson, a family friend who played football at Pitt, recommended Pitt to Lewis. Once Pitt's basketball coaches began to show up at her high school games and recruit her, the choice to head west was an easy decision.

She made her way to Pitt in 1977, joining the team just five years after the introduction of Title IX, a groundbreaking ruling that provided equality for female athletes and programs.

"The first time I ever got on an airplane was here in Pittsburgh," Lewis says. "My family didn't have the finances to fly; we didn't even have vacations growing up. Because of Title IX, wherever the men flew to, they had to start flying the women, too. So one of the most exciting things I did was get on an airplane."

While Lewis excelled on the court and was strong in the classroom, she did ruffle a few feathers early on. She loved the game and looked for competition anywhere she could find it.

That included pickup games against

male athletes at Pitt, including Dan Marino, Mark May, Rickey Jackson, Hugh Green and Sam Clancy, to whom Lewis affectionately refers as her "big brother."

"No one could believe it until they actually saw it," Lewis says of the games featuring some of Pitt's legends. "I just gravitated to them. That first weekend I was on campus, they played pickup, and they just let me play. I'd come to play, even with the football players, and they'd be like, 'Alright, we've got Debbie.'"

The acceptance that she felt as a child was now happening at Pitt. And even though Pitt coach Jean Balthaser didn't love the idea of her risking injury against the rough-and-tumble football players, Lewis' desires eventually won out.

"That's all I'd ever known," she says. "After a while, they just let me go with it. It was helping everybody and was an absolute blast."

But Lewis and her teammates still had a battle to fight off the court. While Title IX was in place when she arrived and certain policies had been implemented, the public attitude toward women's athletics took much longer to change.

"We practiced and played so hard, and people don't get it," she says. "They think the commitment and work is less than the male counterpart,

Debbie Lewis,
Pitt's first women's
basketball star,
holds the record for
assists in a career
(638) while also
ranking second
all-time in steals
(250) and fourth in
points (1,941).

and it's so wrong.

"Once Title IX hit, we had to make even more of an effort to prove ourselves worthy. We had been working hard, but now we had to work even harder."

Lewis did just that. She dished out a program-record 638 assists, scored 1,941 points—the fourth-most in Pitt history—and set records that still stand.

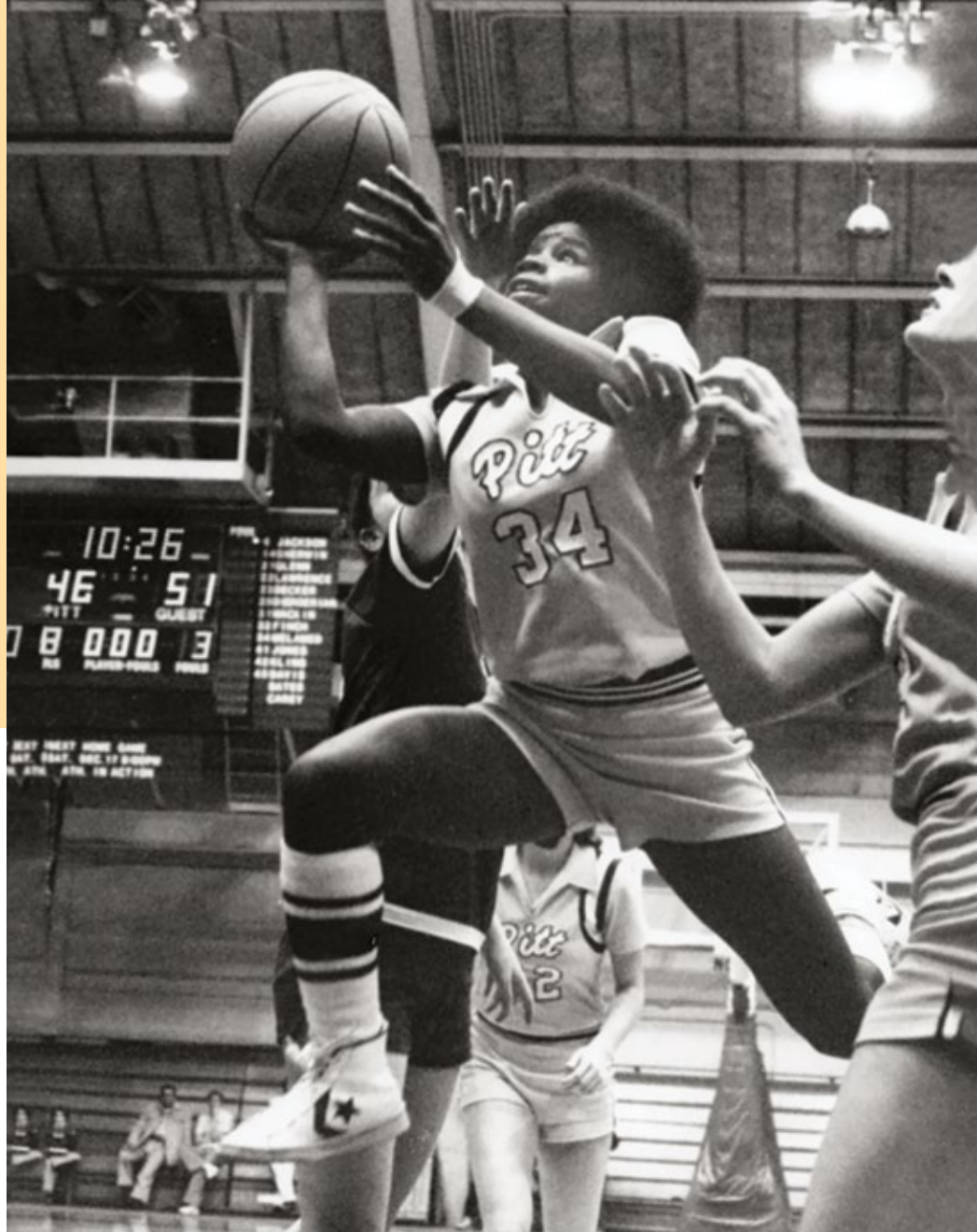
When she graduated with degrees in sociology and African American studies, she knew she wasn't done learning.

Johnson, who had convinced her to come to Pitt in the first place, began to sell her on following him into a career in dentistry.

"It was amazing how doors started to open. I went down and spent time with Dr. Johnson, and he started to tell me that I should think about dentistry. And I was like, 'Oh, goodness, that's the last thing I want to do, work in somebody's mouth.'"

But Lewis finished Pitt dental school in 1988. She worked at a couple of inner-city locations, including a women's prison, helping those in need.

"I always made a commitment to God that I wanted to give back," she says. "The good Lord led me to all of this, and those places gave me a chance to do that."



She then began to work at a dental practice and eventually purchased it years later, taking a risk and betting on herself—a move that has paid off nicely. She works at and operates the office, located on Penn Avenue in Wilkinsburg, to this day.

In fall 2022, Lewis got news she never expected: She was going to be inducted into the Pitt Athletics Hall of Fame. The honor, which she describes as "unbelievable," was the culmination of a remarkable career that took Lewis from the playgrounds of Philadelphia to the blacktop courts of Oakland to cities all over the country and, finally,

to a successful career in which she has been able to own her own business and provide a valuable service to the city she came to nearly five decades ago.

And she thanks Pitt for so much of the good that's happened in her life.

"Pitt taught me a whole lot," she says. "I have nothing bad to ever say about Pitt because it's been so good to me. I couldn't ask for a better education, a better introduction to the world."

"Through Pitt, I got to experience so much, see so much and make lifelong friends. I'm just grateful that Pitt is where I landed. It will always be at the forefront of my heart." P

A Sound Investment

Written by Maggie Rollicheck

Multiple times throughout his life, Joe Novogratz was seen as someone worth investing in. Whether it was his parents investing in his education, the University of Pittsburgh investing in his future or a client investing in his career, Novogratz is where he is today because of the help he received along the way. Now he is paying that generosity forward by funding an endowed scholarship to cover the full tuition of a Pitt student-athlete.

Novogratz grew up in the small town of Northampton, Pennsylvania, with his parents, two brothers and two sisters. His father had immigrated to the United States from Austria at the age of 17 with little more than an eighth-grade education.

"He used to sit around and practice writing his name long hand, and he could read a little bit," Novogratz recalls.

Similarly, his mother was educated only through part of high school. These barriers presented unique challenges but didn't stop his parents from pursuing a better life for their children. Despite the many hardships their family faced, his parents were adamant that their children get the education they were not afforded.

"A lot of people in my neighborhood either went to jail or they went to college," Novogratz says. His father's view was that only one of those outcomes was acceptable. In fact, every time Novogratz came home with incorrect answers on a test, his father would make him correct them, whether the teacher asked for it or not. "He wanted us to have more than he had in his life."

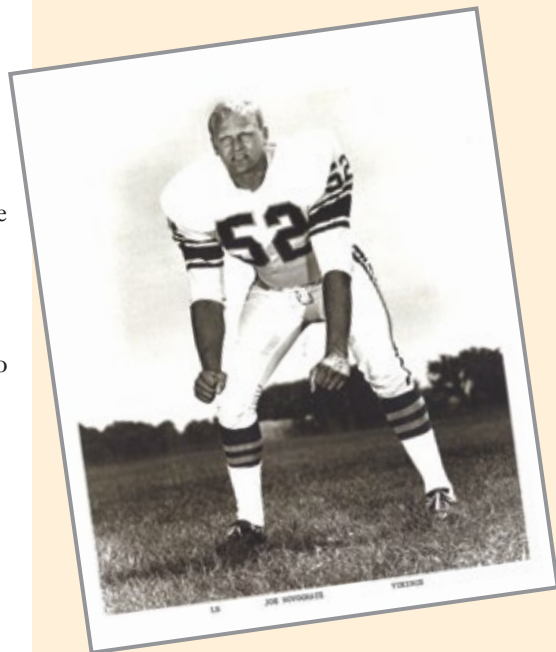
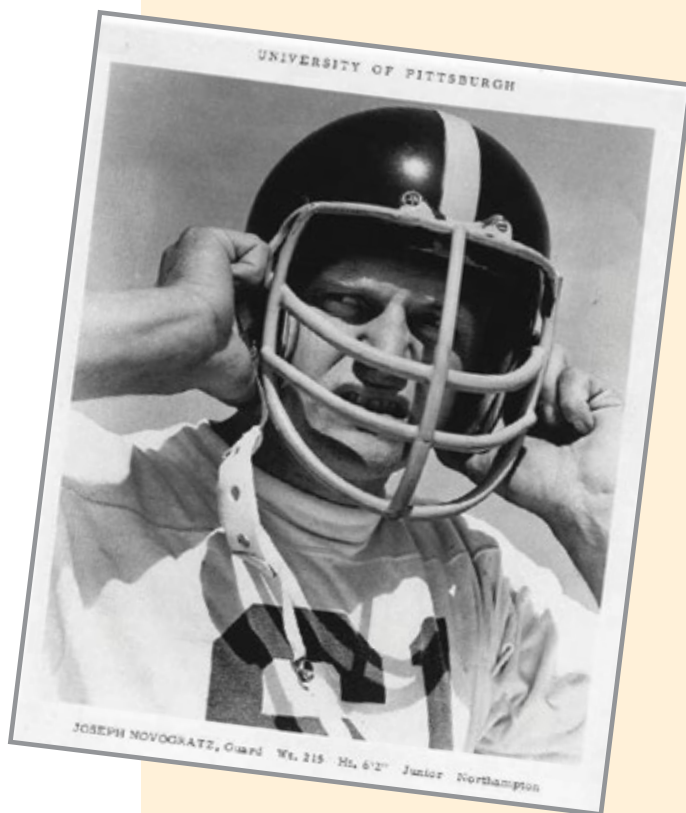
Novogratz and his brothers were fortunate enough to inherit their athletic genes from their mother, who was an athlete and who never missed one of their games. All three boys found a knack for playing football and received scholarships to play in college. His brother Bob was an All-American at Army, and his brother Ed played football and baseball at Moravian University. Novogratz was recruited to the University of Pittsburgh.

When he came to Pitt on scholarship, Novogratz played on both sides of the ball as an offensive guard and linebacker. He enjoyed his time at Pitt for two key reasons: the genuine care and concern shown by his coaches and the camaraderie he felt from his team. Even when coaches were hard on him or his teammates, he knew they were invested in their success. Meanwhile, the friendships he formed with many of his teammates have lasted to this day.

"It was better than a fraternity house," he notes.

On the academic front, Novogratz credits Pitt with teaching him how to study and keeping him on track. The structure and routine created for him by his academic advisors allowed him to focus in the classroom as well as on the field.

Upon graduating, Novogratz signed with the Pittsburgh Steelers as a linebacker and then, just five days later, was traded to the Minnesota Vikings. Pitt continued to be a strong connection as he got to know three of his teammates and fellow Forever Panthers. But he only had the opportunity to enjoy his rookie season: Three days after his first season ended, Novogratz suffered a career-



ending injury when he broke his leg while skiing.

For some, the injury might sound like the tragic end of a lifelong dream; for Novogratz, it was just the beginning. Growing up, he had watched several of his friends and family members find success

The Novogratz Endowed Football Scholarship now has a principal value of more than \$1 million, which will provide full scholarship support for a Pitt football student-athlete in perpetuity.



Joe Novogratz and his son, Chris

in the construction industry.

“When I was in seventh grade, I wrote a composition about what I wanted to do with my life and why I wanted to be a distributor in the construction industry,” he explains. “When you grow up with nothing, you want something you can cherish.”

Ultimately, this brought Novogratz to Owens Corning, where he worked for about a decade. One day, out of the blue, a customer graciously offered him a loan to start his own business.

“He said he got a break in his life, and he wanted to do the same for me,” Novogratz recalls. They walked into a bank, and Novogratz left with a paper bag stuffed with \$250,000 in hundred-dollar bills. Just like that, his entrepreneurial career was launched.

Years later, IDI Distributors, the company Novogratz founded, became the distributor for Owens Corning Fiberglass, bringing his career full circle. The company has grown to 63 locations nationally and employs 750 people. IDI is now being run by Novogratz’s son, Chris, allowing Novogratz and his wife, Amy, to enjoy more time with their nine grandchildren.

As he was able to find success for himself, Novogratz soon began to give back to others. The culmination of his experiences led him to explore philanthropy, but it all started with his father. While Novogratz was in military prep school, he was on a partial scholarship, and his family was responsible for covering the additional cost of tuition.

“I remember my dad had to put in \$1,500,” he recalls, “and he said, ‘There goes my new car.’” His father had passed away before Novogratz had earned enough to buy him that new car. Even

though he never had the opportunity to pay his father back, that experience stuck with him. “I feel like I owe someone something, you know?”

Novogratz became involved with the Minneapolis Heart Institute following his own open-heart surgery and insertion of a pacemaker. His experience with his doctors inspired him to donate to their research on irregular heartbeats. In addition, he and his daughters, Heidi Johnson and Heather Vranich, recently started the Joe Novogratz Foundation, which will provide financial assistance to IDI employees who would like to attend college.

His passion for giving back to education doesn’t end there. Novogratz wanted to create an opportunity for a Pitt student-athlete equal to his own and to establish a resource that would last. His solution was an endowed scholarship, which he funded with an initial pledge in 2004. Over time, he has continued to make regular contributions to the scholarship. The Novogratz Endowed Football Scholarship now has a principal value of more than \$1 million, which will provide full scholarship support for a Pitt football student-athlete in perpetuity.


“This is the least I could do for what Pitt did for me,” he says.

Novogratz hopes that his generosity will inspire other former student-athletes to pay it forward. While he



This is the least I could do for what Pitt did for me.”

– Joe Novogratz

notes that not everyone will be able to create their own endowment, he wants to encourage people to give back to the next generation of student-athletes however they can. After all, if anyone understands the value of an education, it’s Novogratz. He proved that a young kid from Northampton was worth taking a chance on and continues to show that same kindness to others. 



Joe Novogratz and his family



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Send It In, **JEROME!**

It was January 25, 1988.

Jerome Lane raced downcourt on a three-on-one break, gathered a pass from guard Sean Miller on the right wing and took off from just above the block. The ensuing right-handed dunk against Providence shattered a backboard at the Fitzgerald Field House and created a lasting highlight that remains among the best dunks in college basketball history.

Lane, his University of Pittsburgh teammates and nearly everyone in attendance were in awe of the moment. "I didn't realize anything until I looked at Demetreus [Gore]," Lane told ESPN.com in a 2011 interview. "His mouth was open. Then I saw glass on the floor. It came down like snow."

The stunning visual was rivaled by the auditory experience as the standing-room-only crowd erupted.

"When Jerome broke the backboard, it literally sounded like someone threw a brick through a huge glass window," said teammate Jason Matthews.

In the immediate aftermath of the dunk that would delay the game for 32 minutes and send ESPN's Big Monday schedule into disarray, legendary TV analyst Bill Raftery punctuated the moment with his unforgettable call: "Send it in, Jerome!"

Thirty-five years later, Lane's backboard-breaking dunk against the Friars remains the most prominent play in a season that put the Panthers on the college basketball map. The Panthers spent 16 of 17 weeks ranked in the top 10 in the AP poll en route to a 24-7 record and their first outright Big East Conference regular-season championship.

Lane, believed to be the first player to shatter a backboard following the introduction of the breakaway rim, went on to earn second-team All-America honors after averaging 13.9 points and 12.2 rebounds per game. He joined teammate Charles Smith as a first-round pick in the 1988 NBA Draft, marking the only time in program history that the Panthers have had a pair of first-round picks in the same draft. **P**

From Puerto Rico to Pennsylvania, Phillip Ruiz Lugo (known by his friends as Papo) has found success wherever he goes. Juggling life as a dual-sport student-athlete, then eventually going on to create multiple companies, he credits the University of Pittsburgh with believing in him first.



Ruiz Lugo (right) with Varsity Letter Club Director Sam Clancy

What degrees did you earn at Pitt, and when did you graduate?

I graduated in 1981 with a BA degree in accounting.

Why did you choose Pitt?

In 1976, Coach Miguel Rivera invited me to participate in tryouts for the Pitt water polo team. That year, there were several players from Puerto Rico on the team—Butch Silva, Luis Toro, Roberto Simonetti, Mike Mere, Jorge Machicote—and the assistant coach, Juan Curet. At that time, the team was in the top eight in the NCAA. In addition to that, it presented me with the opportunity to go to the city of the best baseball player in the world, the great Roberto Clemente.

As an international student-athlete, describe what that transition was like moving here from Puerto Rico.

Making the decision to go to Pitt was not easy, and I was very nervous, since the English language was not my first language. On a scale from one to 10, my confidence was a three. Nevertheless, I knew it was a great opportunity that I could not miss. At first, it was hard, and I had to adapt

quickly in order to understand some people. There were even certain racial issues because I was Puerto Rican. For example, some people thought I was Black, while others thought I was white. You can imagine the confusion that this situation could create in a 17-year-old student who was on his own and, besides, had problems with the English language. I took the initiative to take several Black studies classes, which helped me a lot to understand everything that was happening around me. I had a teacher named Mr. Brown for my child development class. To my surprise and my benefit, he was a close friend of Roberto Clemente's. I learned a lot from him. Once I began to understand what was happening around me, everything was much easier, and my adjustment turned out to be very fast. I consider Pitt to be my home, and I have my best friends, who are like brothers, with whom I maintain close communication today.

Being a single-sport student-athlete is hard enough. How did you manage competing in both water polo and volleyball during your time at Pitt?

I can summarize this in four words: discipline, sacrifice, commitment and passion.

Describe your experience as a Pitt student-athlete.

Today, I talk about Pitt as if it were yesterday. The treatment I received as a student-athlete at Pitt was

phenomenal. Being a student-athlete at Pitt is a privilege and an experience that I will never forget. I will always be the best ambassador I can be to recommend Pitt.

What were your favorite places to visit on campus?

The Original, known as "the Dirty O"; the student union; Schenley Park; the cafeteria in Tower A; Pitt Stadium

What is your most memorable moment at Pitt?

I have several moments, but there are three that stand out and will be in my heart forever: first, when I was chosen to be part of the water polo All-East conference team; second, when I graduated from Pitt in 1981; and third, when I was inducted into the Varsity Letter Club as an Awardee of Distinction. At 17 years old without knowing much English, I managed to enter Pitt and leave successful. That is why I always say, hail to Pitt.

How did your education and experience help to prepare you for life after college?

I remember my first job interview. I was very nervous, but I knew I was very well prepared. When I started the interview, the first thing the interviewer asked me was where I graduated from. I told him with great pride about the University of Pittsburgh, and everything changed. During the interview, we talked about football and basketball, and to my surprise, he was a big fan of Pitt sports. From that moment on, I was able to realize that the best decision of my life was to have studied at Pitt. The four years I spent at Pitt trained and prepared me to enter the new stage of my life after college. At Pitt, I learned to always look for solutions to problems instead of saying I can't. I learned how important it is to value people not for their race but for what they are.



In 2011, Ruiz Lugo was named a Varsity Letter Club Awardee of Distinction.

What would you say has been your greatest professional accomplishment?

I consider that my greatest success in my career has been all the companies that I have created.* I always try to maintain a family dynamic, even though many are not family members but over time become part of us. In addition, I had the opportunity to create some aquatic



Ruiz Lugo (standing, far left, middle) with water polo teammates

From left: Ruiz Lugo, Sam Clancy and Tony Dorsett at a Forever Panthers tailgate



programs with my father and sons where we tended to the less fortunate and low-income populations. What satisfaction when you know that your programs do good.

Describe what being a Forever Panther means to you.

It is such a great pride that it cannot be explained in a few words. Belonging to a very special group is such a big pride that wherever I go, I want to wear Pitt gear. One of the people who is most proud to be a Panther for life is Sam Clancy. He transmits that positive and proud energy. Sam is one of the sweetest and most affectionate people I have ever met in my life, and I am very proud to call him my brother.

What is something you know now that you wish you could tell your younger self and/or current student-athletes?

Take advantage of Pitt's opportunity to be a student-athlete. Do not waste time on things that will not bring anything positive to your life. Take advantage of all the tutoring programs offered to student-athletes. Choose your friends well. Get well prepared, and when you leave the University and face life every day, you will realize that all the sacrifice was really worth it. You will realize that Pitt prepared you well. 🐾

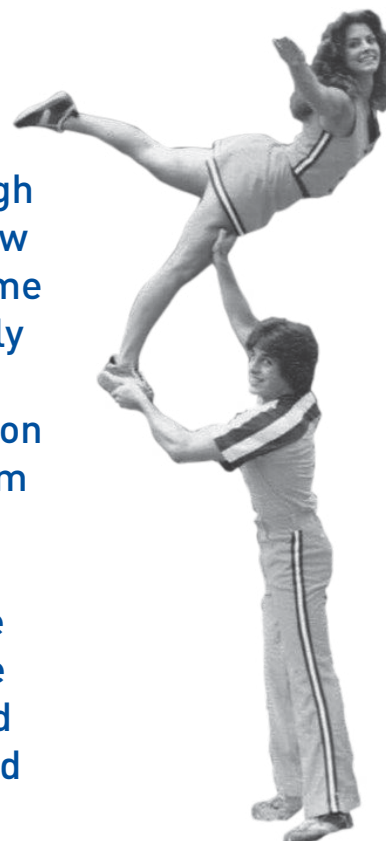
* Empresas Ruiz Sarraga, Inc.; Iron Caribbean Sports Events, Inc.; American Lifeguard Association of Puerto Rico, Inc.; and Puerto Rico Healthy Life Industry, Inc.

Can't Hide Her Pride



Written by Craig Meyer

When Theresa Nuzzo returned to the University of Pittsburgh in 1983, she didn't know exactly what would come next. The school's newly minted cheerleading coach had energy, drive and ambition for her alma mater and the program for which she once cheered. But in her early 20s and with her whole professional life in front of her, she wondered little about how long she might be there. She was too excited about the present to be preoccupied with the future.



This year marks Nuzzo's 40th at the University, and while her work largely happens on the sidelines, she is as much a fixture as anyone in the athletics department. Coaches and administrators have come and gone, but Nuzzo is still there, working as tirelessly as ever.

"The main things I always tried

to instill in the students who were under me was to have a good work ethic, to respect and treat others the way you want to be treated, to always hold the University in the highest regard and to always represent themselves with the utmost professionalism and kindness," Nuzzo says. "I don't think I've ever wavered from that. That's still my main, number-one thing with the kids that I coach. So many wonderful students have come through the program. One of the most rewarding things for me is the relationships. When you're having the reunions and when you're seeing everyone over the years and the relationships they've all made in the group, it's just outstanding to see."

Over all those years, Nuzzo's teams have claimed four national championships,

including a run of three consecutive titles from 1992 to 1994. In 2019, Pitt's cheerleaders claimed the Division I Small Coed crown at the National Cheerleaders Association and National Dance Alliance Collegiate National Championship in Daytona Beach, Florida. In the early 1990s, Nuzzo founded the school's dance team, which has had several top-10 finishes in national competitions, including a fifth-place finish in 1998.

When asked if she could have envisioned still being at Pitt 40 years after her return, Nuzzo chuckles and says, "Probably not." With the benefit of hindsight, though, her longevity at the school and with the cheer, dance and mascot programs makes all the sense in the world. In many ways, it's a perfect fit.

A Pittsburgh native, Nuzzo attended the University, graduating in 1981 with a degree in communication and a minor in child psychology. She was a Pitt cheerleader herself, giving her a front-row seat to the Panthers' athletic successes. Her time at the University was part of a golden era for the Pitt football program,



which was fresh off a national championship when she arrived on campus in 1977. In three of her four years as an undergraduate, the Panthers football team finished the season ranked in the top 10.

From those years, she remembers moments far more than numbers. There

was the old Pitt Stadium tucked into the school's bustling campus in Oakland, with thousands of spectators ascending "Cardiac Hill" to support their team on game days. There was the travel associated with cheering on a winning college football program, with trips to the Fiesta Bowl and Gator Bowl serving as highlights. On those excursions, Nuzzo says, the football players, coaches and cheerleaders were "one big family."

"Those types of memories stick with you," she says.

Shortly after graduating, she returned to Pitt as an assistant cheerleading coach under her former coach and mentor, Karen Agostinella. When Agostinella left a couple of years later, Nuzzo took the reins of the program.

Nuzzo and her fiancé, Michael, who cheered together at Pitt and were partners their senior year, launched Elite Cheerleading in 1982. The idea behind it was relatively straightforward but also groundbreaking. At the time, most cheerleading coaching was based around mass instructional clinics at places like colleges. The Nuzzos, however, built their business on private teaching, which would require them to go into schools and work with cheerleaders one on one. To this day, Elite Cheerleading instructs thousands of pupils annually.

"We were creating something new," Nuzzo says.

For decades, she has balanced both of those jobs, always keeping her proverbial plate full—not that she would have it any other way. If nothing else, Nuzzo's career has been defined by constant activity. It's made possible by a work ethic instilled in her at a young age by her parents, particularly her father, who would often tell her, "You either do it to the best of your ability or you don't do it at all."

That saying has been reflected in the variety of roles she has occupied over her career, jobs that she often was working simultaneously. From 1983 to 1988, the former Miss Pennsylvania worked as a beauty pageant coordinator in Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. From 2007 to 2013, she served as the corporate and group ticket sales coordinator at Pitt. She has helped to

produce the Pittsburgh Steelers' fashion show, which benefits the UPMC Sports Medicine Concussion Program and Cancer Bridges.

Even her role as cheerleading coach, dance coach and mascot coordinator goes well beyond being with her team at sporting events and preparing it for competitions. The cheerleading and dance teams, as well as Roc the Panther, are active in the Pittsburgh community and surrounding areas at charity functions and other special events.

This past term, the spirit teams logged more than 450 community service hours and attended approximately 45 events throughout the community. She collaborates with the Department of Athletics' marketing team to coordinate game day fan experiences, supports the Pitt Alumni Association with various outreach efforts and works with the Panther Club on special initiatives.

It's a level of drive and commitment in her own life that she passes on to her cheerleaders.

"She's really a master teacher at getting the job done," says Carrie Sanders, who cheered for Nuzzo from 1987 to 1991 and remains close with her. "She drove people to execute to their greatest abilities. Whether I was working for her or cheering for her, she allowed us to be creative, yet she pushed us really to the limit. She would be like, 'Hey, I'm going to give you these 100 tasks,' knowing you could only possibly accomplish half, if you were lucky."



Theresa Nuzzo with the 2022 dance team

“

She drove people to execute to their greatest abilities. Whether I was working for her or cheering for her, she allowed us to be creative, yet she pushed us really to the limit.”

– Carrie Sanders

As busy as she has been, Nuzzo can still take time to appreciate what she has been able to witness over her career, collecting fond memories she cherishes and can still easily recall. She was 20 feet away from Jerome Lane when the men’s basketball star famously shattered a backboard in 1988 at the Fitzgerald Field House. In the final game at Pitt Stadium in 1999, a 37-27 Panthers victory over the Notre Dame, she joined her team on the field and cheered with them.

Some career highlights have been more deeply personal. When her son, Michael, was a sophomore at Pitt, she talked him into filling in as Roc for one day for an event. He ended up being the mascot for the remainder of his time in college, giving him and his mother extra time together.

“To look back on that timeline and the individuals who have come through and to see the success stories and to hear them talk about what an impact the program had on them and the relationships and experiences they had ... [W]inning is wonderful, but the long-standing memories, relationships and experiences—you can’t put a price tag on that,” Nuzzo says.

Over these past 40 years, Nuzzo has had to adapt and evolve. Cheerleading and the world around it have changed so much in that time. The lessons she tries to pass along and the bonds she has forged with her athletes have been timeless, though. As she looks back on

her career, the impact she has had on those she has coached—and how it has helped them long after they’ve left Pitt—is what she ultimately values the most. She thinks often about her athletes who have excelled academically while in school and gone on to have professional success and personal happiness.

Sanders, for example, took a job at UPS after she graduated, and she still works there 31 years later. The ways in which Nuzzo shaped her became apparent from the very start of her time with the company.

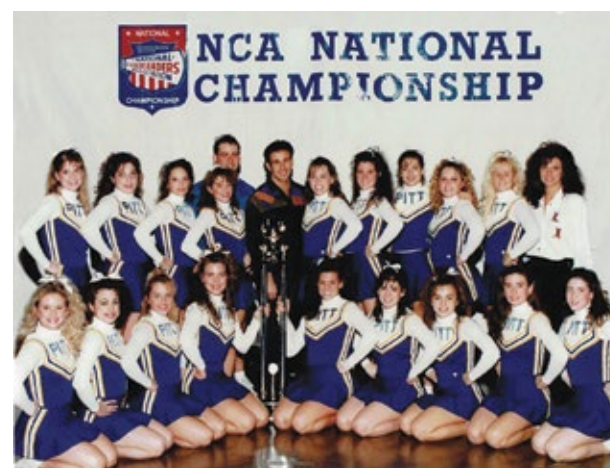
“When I first arrived, I did things quickly,” Sanders says. “A coworker told me to slow down. I didn’t know how to do that. I was used to being under [Nuzzo]. I didn’t know how to sit still or slow down, and I’m glad I didn’t. I told the person, ‘You can sit down. I’m not about to sit down, because in 30 years, I’m not going to be sitting here in the same seat.’ [Nuzzo] gave you so much to do and had such high expectations that you were like, ‘OK, there is no sitting still. There is no time to waste. You’re going to get the job done no matter what the job is.’ It taught me a lot.”

The connection she has with her athletes and the passion she has for her job are what keep Nuzzo going.

In recognition of her dedication and commitment, Nuzzo recently was honored as the first spirit group member to be honored as a Varsity Letter Club Awardee of Distinction.

Through it all, Nuzzo continues with a career that’s more of a calling at a school that is not only a home but an integral part of who she is.

“There is just a really strong level of commitment and loyalty that I have to the University, no matter what,” Nuzzo says. “It just became stronger and stronger as time went on. I often wonder if the day [will] come when I’ll really feel comfortable walking away. I can’t imagine my life without it yet. I still get great enjoyment out of the students. I still enjoy what I do tremendously. I still have a lot of passion for making a difference and for providing an opportunity for these students to have a great experience. It has become a part of me.”



From top to bottom: 1992, 1993 and 1994 Pitt national championship cheer teams

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PITT MEMORIES

Twenty-five years ago, on March 25, 1998, the Pitt women's softball team played its inaugural game against St. Francis (Pa.) on a makeshift field at Pitt Stadium.

Jen Mannick



The Panther Club announced the creation of an exclusive philanthropic giving society for the University of Pittsburgh Department of Athletics in 2020. Since then, **The Script Society** has **grown to 140 members** who help provide critical financial support for more than 850 student-athletes, band, and spirit squad members. With members committing a minimum of \$50,000 over a five-year period, the resources provided by this group of generous donors have allowed Pitt to enhance the student-athlete experience.

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This year, members kicked off the fall seasons with a dinner at Director of Athletics Heather Lyke's home, spent time with Pitt players and coaches on the road, attended exclusive events, enjoyed on-field access and more!



For more information about The Script Society, contact **Lee Roberts**, executive associate athletic director, philanthropy and engagement at: scriptsociety@athletics.pitt.edu, or visit hailtopitt.com.



Department of Athletics

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An aerial view of a football stadium at dusk, with the field and stands visible. A large graphic overlay is positioned on the left side of the image. The graphic consists of a yellow rectangular frame with a border of small circles, resembling a marquee sign. Inside the frame, the word "Pitt" is written in a large, blue, stylized font with a yellow outline. To the right of "Pitt", the text "'23 SEASON TICKETS" is written in a white, sans-serif font. Below this, the words "ON SALE" and "NOW" are written in large, white, block letters. At the bottom of the frame, a blue banner contains the text "STARTING AT \$185" in white, sans-serif font.

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