

A photograph of two women standing in front of a dark, slatted background. The woman on the left has long dark hair and is wearing a tan jacket over a black top. The woman on the right has long brown hair and is wearing a yellow Milwaukee Brewers jersey with the number 3. They are both smiling and holding an orange Wilson Evolution NXT basketball together. The basketball has 'Wilson' and 'EVOLUTION NXT' printed on it.

THE ROAR REPORT

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A PIECE OF MILWAUKEE HISTORY

WOMEN'S SOCCER IN
THE NCAA RANKINGS

PITCHERS & CATCHERS
REPORT IN FEBRUARY

MORT SAYYED: WHEN THE PANTHERS
ARE YOUR PASSION

BUILT ON BELIEF:
NATALIE BLOCK'S JOURNEY FORWARD

A Black & Gold Family Affair

by Gary D'Amato

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SPORT UPDATES

Men's basketball, women's basketball and swimming & diving.

A PIECE OF MILWAUKEE HISTORY

As one of the organizations in the city continuing the legacy of the MECCA, the Panthers remain stewards of the arena and are now using the new uniform. Working alongside Ben Koller, the program incorporated the legendary floor design into Panther jerseys which debuted December 19. Look back at the history of the legendary floor design.

WOMEN'S SOCCER IN THE NCAA RANKINGS

The Milwaukee women's soccer team wrapped up yet another very successful 2025 campaign, returning to the NCAA Tournament for the eighth consecutive season. The team finished Top-10 on the NCAA charts in numerous statistical categories.

PITCHERS & CATCHERS REPORT IN FEBRUARY

With Spring Training for the 2026 Major League Baseball season right around the corner, take a look back at the former Milwaukee baseball players who wrapped up their most recent professional campaigns, including the first-ever World Series appearance by a former Panther – courtesy of Daulton Varsho of the Toronto Blue Jays.

A BLACK & GOLD FAMILY AFFAIR

The family dynamic runs deep for the Milwaukee women's basketball team, as head coach Kyle Rechlicz not only leads her program, but her daughter Payton, on the court. Feature writer Gary D'Amato takes a look at the dynamic for the family on the court since arriving on campus.

MORT SAYYED: WHEN THE PANTHERS ARE YOUR PASSION

Since arriving on campus as a freshman student over 20 years ago, Mort Sayyed has evolved into one of the most passionate supporters of the men's basketball program. Take a look back into how it all happened for Sayyed.

BUILT ON BELIEF: NATALIE BLOCK'S JOURNEY FORWARD

One of the most decorated student-athletes in program history, Natalie Block is looking forward to a final season on the track. Take a look back into what she has been through and what the future holds.

INFORMATION ON THE PANTHERS EXCELLENCE FUND

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LIGHT UP THE HYPE

The Panthers went 13-5-3 overall during the 2025 campaign and posted an unbeaten Horizon League record of 8-0-2. The team returned to the NCAA Tournament for the eighth time in program history and is the only NCAA Division I program to have won its regular-season and league tournament championships each of the past five seasons.



TURN THE LIGHT UP

Representing Milwaukee, sophomore **Sam Lorenz** competed at the U.S. Open Championships in Austin, Texas. In the 50 Backstroke prelim, Lorenz finished second in his heat with a time of 25.24. This performance landed Lorenz a spot in the 50 Backstroke A-Final, where he turned in a sixth-place effort, clocking a time of 25.29.



**NEW
LOOK
SAME
GREAT
TASTE**



MEN'S BASKETBALL SPORT UPDATE



The Milwaukee men's basketball team heads into the New Year with an overall record of 7-8 but is currently tied for first place in the Horizon League standings with a 3-1 record.

It has been a challenging season to date health-wise, as the Panthers have been without the services of returner **John Lovelace Jr.** from the start of the season and have also lost **Seth Hubbard** to an injury. Both players will miss the remainder of the campaign. Lovelace was one of the top returners for the squad and Hubbard had been the team's leading scorer – and among the league leaders – through the first nine games before he got shut down at 16.6 points per game. The team has also been without the services of freshman **Stevie Elam** due to injury, with his 8.4 points and 3.4 rebounds per game on the sidelines until he returns.

The top current active scorer for the MKE offense is **Danilo Jovanovich**, who is coming off his first collegiate double-double on New Year's Day (15 points/10 rebounds). He is scoring 12.7 points per

game and is among league leaders with his team-best 6.5 rebounds per night and 59.0 percent field-goal shooting. **Amar Augillard** joins Jovanovich in double figures at 11.3 points a game.

The freshmen have been impressive: In addition to Elam, **Josh Dixon** is contributing nearly 10 points a game (9.3 ppg) and is among the NCAA leaders with his 95.0 percent (38-of-40) shooting from the free throw line. Making his first two starts, he scored 24 points against South Dakota State and 28 in a win over Cleveland State to help him land National Mid-Major Player of the Week accolades. **Sekou Konneh** also has been very good, chipping in 6.1 points and 4.5 rebounds in just 11 minutes a game on average.

The schedule has been very demanding and travel has been challenging, with the team playing three games in a span of four days at one point. The five non-conference road games the team has played have come against a lineup of opponents that are currently 43-2 (.956 winning percentage) on their home courts this winter.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL SPORT UPDATE



Through the first half of the calendar season, the Milwaukee women's basketball team has posted four wins in 14 contests, including an early-season victory against future Horizon League member Northern Illinois and a thrilling overtime victory over Valparaiso.

The Panthers have been led by junior **Jorey Buwalda**, who is just shy of averaging a double-double on the season. Through 13 games, Buwalda had 13.0 points per game and 9.8 rebounds per contest.

Overall, Milwaukee has been led in scoring by six different players this season, including twice by senior **Grace Lomen**. Lomen poured in 23 points during the overtime win over Valparaiso and added 21 in a victory over Division III power Wisconsin Lutheran.

Freshman **Tierney Madigan** has been impactful during her first season with the Panthers, averaging 5.2 points per

contest. She has recorded three straight double-digit performances against Pacific (10), UC Davis (13), and in the league opener versus Youngstown State (17).

Heading into 2026, the Panthers have 17 league games remaining, including a celebration of the program's 20th and 25th anniversary teams from its two NCAA Championship appearances when Milwaukee hosts Green Bay on Jan. 17.

Other highlights on the remaining home schedule including Homecoming against Wright State (Jan. 31), School Day versus Northern Kentucky (Feb. 12), and Senior Day against IU Indy on the regular-season finale (Feb. 28).



SWIMMING & DIVING SPORT UPDATE

Panther Swimming & Diving saw the program's earliest start in its history, competing on Sept. 12-13 in Indianapolis, Ind., against a handful of conference opponents. Milwaukee has competed in five meets in the fall portion of its schedule, with the men's dual record sitting at 3-2, and the women's dual record at 2-3.

Sam Lorenz has been a clear standout for the Black & Gold, setting school records in six different events across five meets in a Panther uniform. The sophomore transfer from Wisconsin set individual Panther records at the House of Champions Invitational in the 50 Freestyle (19.68), 100 Backstroke (45.75), and the 200 Backstroke (1:43.49) as well as relay records in the 200 Medley Relay (1:26.64), 400 Medley Relay (3:12.51), and the 400 Freestyle Relay (2:57.20).

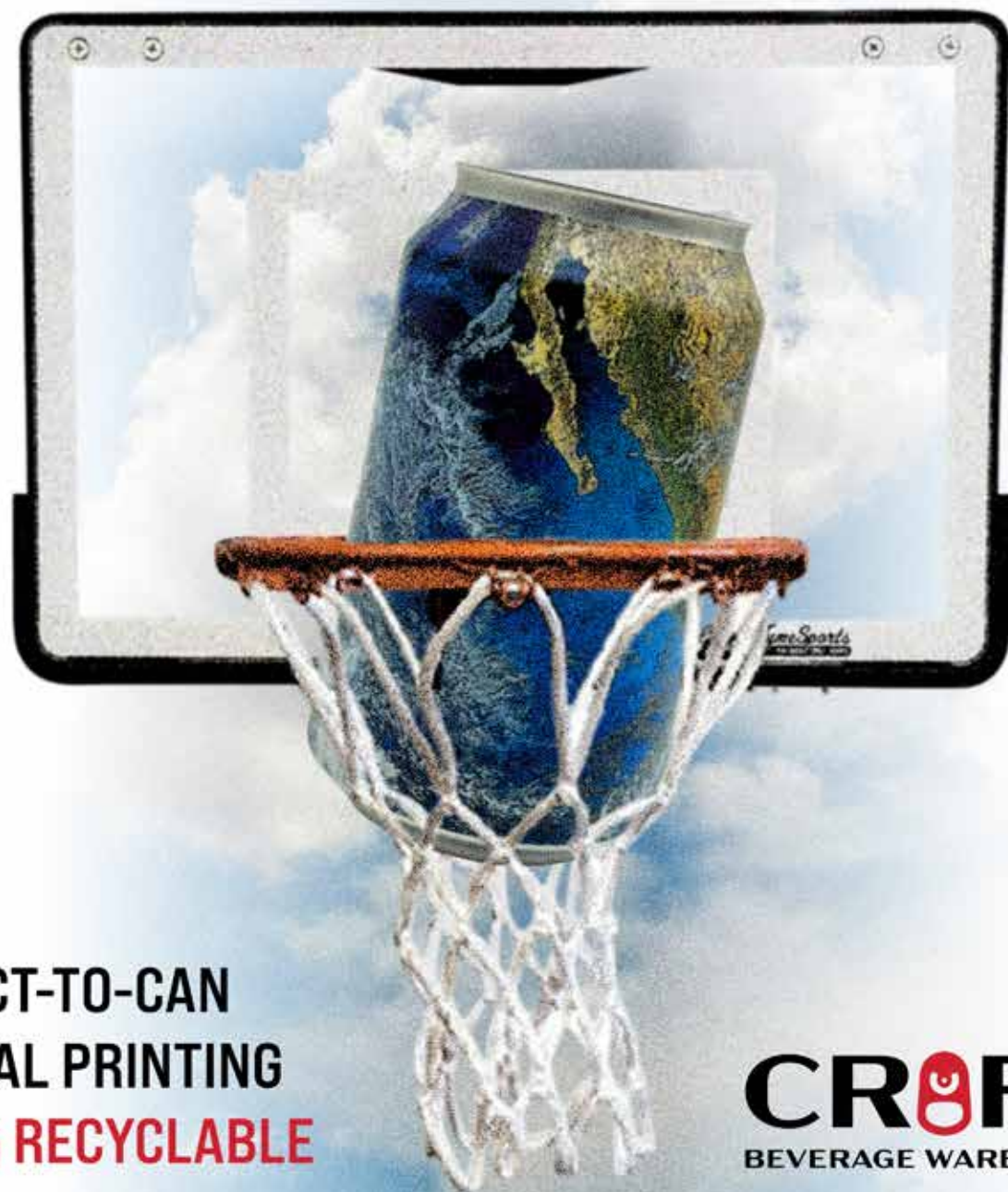
Gabrielle LePine has also had an incredibly strong season for Milwaukee. At IU Indy's House of Champions Invitational, LePine took home the crown

in the finals for the 50 Breaststroke (28.09) and the 100 Breaststroke (1:01.05).

The trio of Lorenz, LePine, and **Caleb Carlisle** represented Milwaukee at the U.S. Open Championships in Austin, Texas, from December 3-6. In the 50 Backstroke A-Final, Sam Lorenz took sixth in a loaded pool, finishing with a time of 25.29. LePine competed in the 50 and 100 Breaststroke, while Carlisle raced the 50 Breaststroke, 50 Butterfly, and 100 Butterfly.

This season, Lorenz has earned Swimmer of the Week honors twice from the Horizon League. LePine has also received a Swimmer of the Week nod, bringing her career total to five.

Milwaukee looks ahead to the MKE Time Trials (Jan. 16-17), a conference matchup at Green Bay (Jan. 24), and a meet hosting Stevens Point (Jan. 30). The Black & Gold will round out its season with the Wisconsin Badger Invitational (Feb. 6-7) and the Horizon League Championships (Feb. 18-21).



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A PIECE OF MILWAUKEE HISTORY



As one of the organizations in the city continuing the legacy of the MECCA (sports and art), the Panthers remain stewards of the arena and are now using the new uniform.

Discover more about the Legacy of the floor at www.MECCAFLOOR.com.

The floor was commissioned as a piece of pop art, fitting into the wider pop art movement of the 1960s and '70s. Pop art was known for bold colors, graphic imagery, and blending high art with everyday visual culture — all qualities found in Indiana's design.



Photo by NPR: <https://www.npr.org/2014/01/05/259408158/robert-indiana-a-career-defined-by-love-no-longer>

In 1977, the City of Milwaukee hired pop artist Robert Indiana to paint the basketball floor at the MECCA Arena.

The court was unveiled to the public in September of 1977 and the first game was played on it when the Milwaukee Bucks defeated the Chicago Bulls by a final score of 113-95 on October 4, 1977.

The floor was commissioned as a piece of pop art, fitting into the wider pop art movement of the 1960s and '70s. Pop art was known for bold colors, graphic imagery, and blending high art with everyday visual culture — all qualities found in Indiana's design.



Photo : <http://basketball.ballparks.com/NBA/MilwaukeeBucks/oldindex.htm>

1970's

DECEMBER 13, 1971: The Panthers play their first-ever game at the MECCA, taking on UTEP.

1990's

DECEMBER OF 1992: The Panthers become a permanent fixture on the arena schedule.

FALL OF 1998: The Bucks leave the MECCA and move into the Bradley Center.

2000's

NOVEMBER OF 2003: Milwaukee returns its regular season games downtown, beating Montana, 95-83, in the season opener, at what is then U.S. Cellular Arena.

2010's

2010: After being tipped off that the floor was being sold on an architectural salvage site, Greg Koller, owner of ProStar Inc., stepped in and purchased the iconic MECCA Floor in hopes of preserving its legacy and building a platform for future generations

The MECCA court is displayed at Milwaukee City Hall as a pop-art piece.

2011: Upon his father Greg's death, Ben Koller, his mother, and sister buy the floor to finish the mission his father never got a chance to complete.

2020's

2025: The Milwaukee Panthers, working alongside Ben Koller, Greg's son, incorporate the legendary floor design into Panther jerseys which debuted December 19.



Photo : <https://www.meccafloor.com/gallery>



<https://www.retroseasons.com/stadiums/us-cellular-arena/>



Photo : <https://www.meccafloor.com/gallery>



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WOMEN'S SOCCER IN THE NCAA RANKS

ASSISTS PER GAME **4TH** 3.10

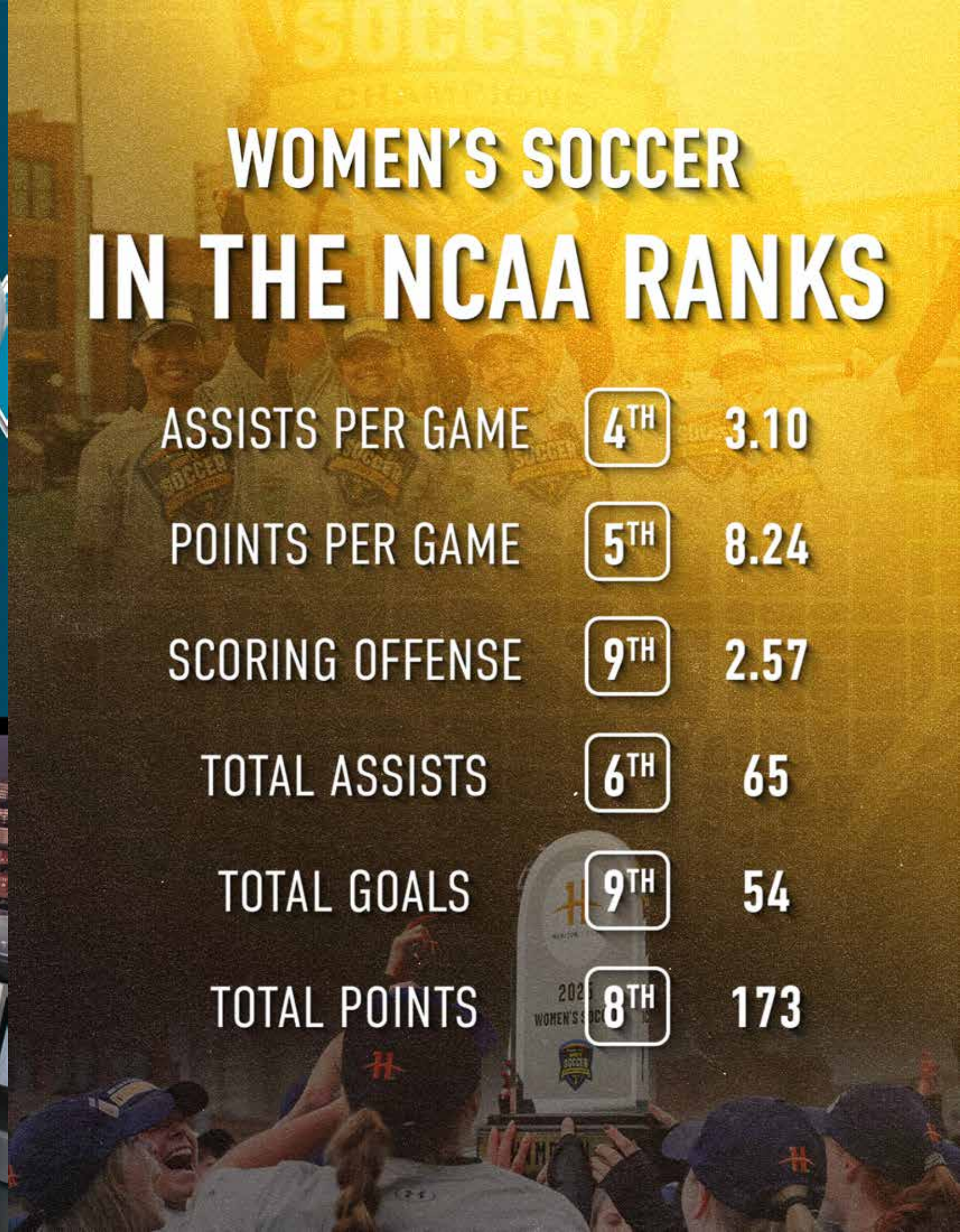
POINTS PER GAME **5TH** 8.24

SCORING OFFENSE **9TH** 2.57

TOTAL ASSISTS **6TH** 65

TOTAL GOALS **9TH** 54

TOTAL POINTS **8TH** 173



PITCHERS & CATCHERS REPORT IN FEBRUARY

2025 RETROSPECT ON PANTHERS IN ORGANIZED BASEBALL



DAULTON VARSHO



There are few phrases more celebrated in professional sports than “Game Seven,” and for the first time in eight years, the World Series required a winner-take-all finale to decide a champion. This year’s Fall Classic featured the National League’s Los Angeles Dodgers against the American League Champion Toronto Blue Jays.

Roaming center field for the Blue Jays was none other than Milwaukee’s own **Daulton Varsho**, the program’s first Major Leaguer to appear in the World Series, doing so in just his sixth MLB season and third with Toronto.

Varsho played a pivotal role in Toronto’s first World Series run since 1992, collecting 17 hits, including four doubles and three home runs, while scoring 12 runs and driving in 10 over 18 postseason games. The 2024 Gold Glove Award winner also made a spectacular diving

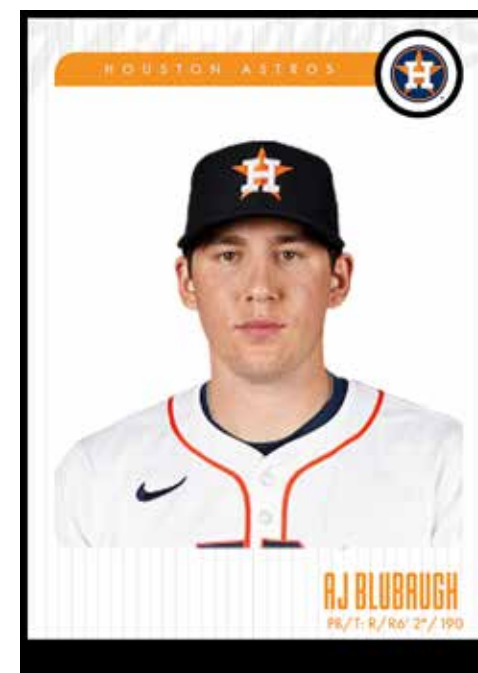
catch in Game Seven to help keep the Blue Jays in front at the time.

Although the Dodgers ultimately secured the championship with an extra-inning win in Game Seven, a large core of Toronto’s roster, Varsho included, is expected to return, positioning the Blue Jays as contenders once again in 2026.

Varsho was limited to just 71 games during the regular season after a pair of injuries delayed his debut until late April and cost him two additional months during the summer. Even so, he delivered arguably the most powerful offensive season of his career, posting a .238/.284/.548 slash line with 20 home runs and 55 RBIs.

After three consecutive seasons of at least 136 games entering 2025, Varsho is looking forward to a fully healthy season in 2026 and be a key contributor throughout the regular season as Toronto aims for another World Series run.

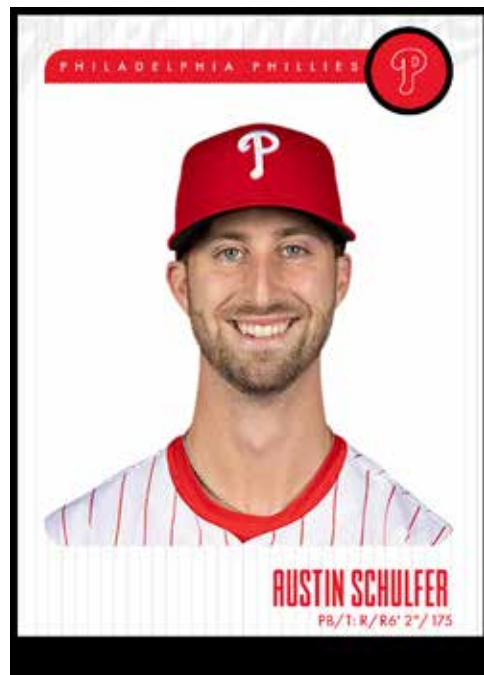
AJ BLUBAUGH



Milwaukee’s second Major Leaguer, pitcher **AJ Blubaugh**, received the call early in the season to make his MLB debut for the Houston Astros on April 30, striking out six Tigers over four innings.

After being optioned back to Triple-A Sugar Land, his stay in the minors was brief; Blubaugh was recalled to Houston in August and ultimately finished the season on the Astros’ Major League roster.

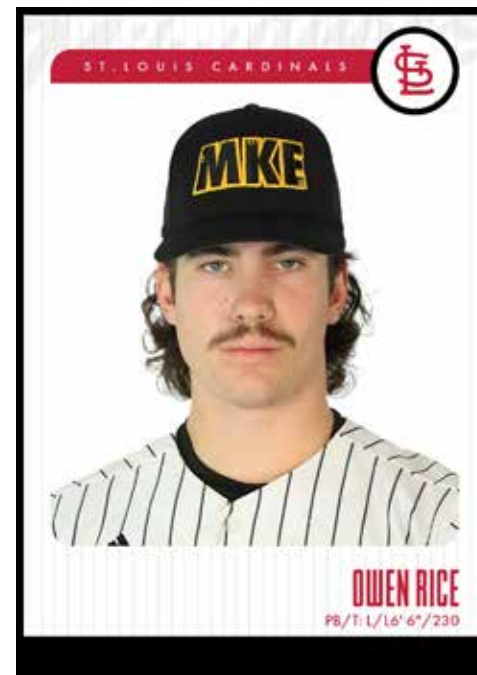
He made three starts and 11 total pitching appearances at the Major League level, covering 32 innings with 35 strikeouts. He allowed just six earned runs, finishing with a 1.69 ERA, and will look to claim a regular role with Houston in 2026, either as a starter or a reliever.



AUSTIN SCHULFER

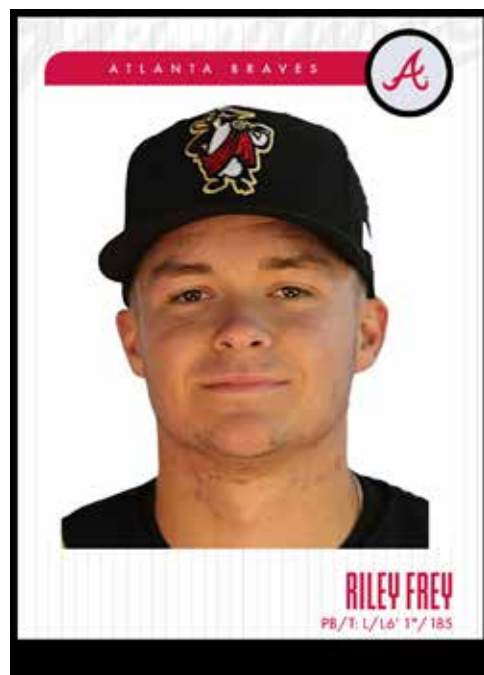
Pitcher **Austin Schulfer** signed with the Philadelphia Phillies prior to the 2025 season and was invited to Major League Spring Training before being reassigned to Triple-A Lehigh Valley in the International League.

Schulfer made 21 appearances for the IronPigs, including two starts, striking out 15 batters over 21 innings. He enters the offseason as a free agent and will look to continue his professional career in 2026.



OWEN RICE

Milwaukee's most recent draftee, selected in 2024, **Owen Rice** was assigned to the St. Louis Cardinals' Florida Complex League affiliate. Rice will look to work his way onto a full-season minor league roster in 2026 after beginning his professional career with Palm Beach prior to his FCL assignment.



RILEY FREY

Playing his first two seasons in the Atlanta Braves organization primarily at Augusta, Georgia, Oshkosh native **Riley Frey** spent most of 2025 with the High-A Rome Emperors. He earned a brief promotion to Double-A Columbus in July before returning to Rome.

Across three teams this season, Frey logged 80 1/3 innings over 22 appearances, including nine starts. He collected four wins, recorded a 4.37 ERA, and posted a professional career-high 83 strikeouts.

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It happened very early — during just the second or third practice — in **Payton Rechlicz's** freshman season on Milwaukee's women's basketball team. And it happened just once.

There was a pause in the action on the court, and Payton had a question.

"Mom?" she said.

Mom?

"I don't think I even acknowledged her," head coach **Kyle Rechlicz** says with a laugh. "I didn't look at her. There are no moms out here. I don't know what she's talking about."

Payton's one-time slip, excusable as it was — after all, she is Kyle Rechlicz's daughter — illustrated the interesting dynamic of a parent coaching a child at the Division I college level.

As close as Kyle and Payton are off the court, their relationship on the court is strictly coach-player. It has to be that way, of course. Any hint of favoritism, of bending a rule, of excusing away a careless mistake, won't go unnoticed by others on the team. The reverse also is true. Payton's teammates must be able to trust that what they tell her in confidence won't be discussed over the dinner table that night.

"Payton is very good in that sense," Kyle says. "She doesn't tell me things that I don't need to know. She lets other people tell me. She'll encourage them, 'Hey, I think you should just go talk to coach.' I



think she has a very good understanding of what's appropriate to tell me and what's not."

That trust is borne out by the fact that Payton's teammates voted her onto the Panthers' four-player Leadership Team, along with senior Grace Lomen, junior Jorey Buwalda and redshirt junior Jada Williams. Payton, a redshirt sophomore, is the youngest member of the Leadership Team.

"I'm honored to be in that role," she says. "But I think everyone's voice on our team is important."

There was never a doubt that Payton, a 5-foot-11 guard-forward, was going to attend Milwaukee and play for the Panthers. Her mother is in her 14th season as the head coach and before that held assistant coaching positions at Cleveland State, Dayton and the University of Wisconsin, where as a player she helped lead the Badgers to NCAA Tournament berths in 2001 and 2002.

Payton has been around basketball her entire life. That doesn't mean the journey has been easy.

Not long after she committed to Milwaukee as a sophomore at Menomonee Falls High School, she suffered a devastating injury — a torn ACL in her left knee — during an AAU game.

A Black & Gold Family Affair



"I was at a different tournament," Kyle says. "My assistant called me and said, 'It doesn't look good.' That was really tough, because I wasn't there. That was really hard for me personally."

Payton went through the months-long rehabilitation grind and missed her junior year of basketball at Menomonee Falls. Almost exactly one year later, in another AAU game — her first game back, in fact — she again tore the ACL in her left knee.

"I happened to be at that game and when she went down she immediately looked at me when she was on the ground and said, 'I tore it again,'" Kyle says.

Another grueling rehab. Another season of high school basketball lost. Think about that — a college-bound student-athlete who didn't compete at all during her junior and senior years.

The physical challenge was difficult enough, but in addition to building back the strength in her knee, she had to build back her confidence.

"It was hard," Payton says. "It's definitely a mental journey, but I had a lot of people who were there for me. My family, my mom and dad, taking me to PT and doing all that stuff. I just really had the goal of playing in college and I wanted to get back and get stronger.

"I wish it wouldn't have happened, but I wouldn't be the person I am now if it wouldn't have happened. I grew a lot as a person, I think."

She redshirted that first season at Milwaukee.

Though she had great intuition on the court, she was still building trust in her knee while at the same time negotiating a steep learning curve. The game was faster, the athletes better than what she'd ever experienced.

"It was a little hard to see where I would be at with not playing in high school and making that big jump," Payton says. "The game is so much faster. In the summer when I got here, I just kind of worked on not being afraid to make mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes and you've got to learn from them and figure out what your role is."

Says Kyle, "I think coming back after those injuries, knowing she was going to be coming into college, there was a little bit of fear. But we have a fantastic training staff and (assistant athletic trainer) Paige Borst is phenomenal. ... She has gained so much confidence and so much strength in that knee. It has been fun watching her come back and grow."

By the start of the 2024-25 season, Payton was ready. She played in all 32 games as a redshirt freshman and started 23, ending the season among the team leaders with a .457 field goal percentage. She was sixth on the team in both scoring (4.2) and rebounding (3.0) and was named to the Horizon



League All-Freshman Team.

Her biggest contribution though, was and continues to be on the defensive end.

"She is one of our best defenders by far," Kyle says. "She rarely gives up points on the floor. She just sees the game differently. I don't know if it's all the basketball she's watched over the years with me. But especially on the defensive side, she just visually sees the game differently. She's always in the right position, always willing to help somebody. She can guard one through four defensively and keep the ball in front of her. She just understands angles. Having somebody like that is extremely valuable to us."

This season, the coaching staff has worked with Payton to expand her game offensively. She can shoot from three-point range and can get to the basket, but tends to pass up shots she could, and should, be taking.

"Last year she was more of a role player for us," Kyle says. "Great screen setter, rebounder, does all the little things. This year we're asking her to score a little bit more and there's times she's passing up shots. She's kind of growing into that confidence of being a little bit more of a scorer."

Basketball is in Payton's blood, but she's far from a one-dimensional student-athlete. An excellent student, she plans to earn her degree in biochemistry and pre-med with a minor in psychology. She has her sights set on attending medical school after graduating.

Last summer, she had a seven-week paid internship in a virology lab co-sponsored by Harvard and MIT in Boston. As if there weren't enough on her plate, Payton started volunteering last fall at Ascension Columbia St. Mary's Hospital, not far from campus.

Despite her hectic schedule, she is all basketball when it's time to practice or play. And though mother and daughter say they are good at compartmentalizing what happens on the court, the hardest part is going home after a loss.

"If we lose a game and we're both upset, it's hard for me to be upset but it's even harder seeing that my mom's upset," Payton says. "You don't want to

ever see your mom upset. We each see the game from a different perspective, too, and you have to take that into account."

When they do get away from the game, Kyle and Payton are just mother and daughter. They enjoy taking girl trips, shopping and exploring Milwaukee's diverse restaurant scene.

"She's a great role model," Payton says. "She's one of the strongest people I know. She's gone through a lot in life and she's taught me so much about how to respond to different things. Even watching her at work and seeing how she interacts with different people and how she coaches the team and handles hard situations is really inspiring. She does it all with grace. I've learned a lot from her."

Payton has two years of eligibility remaining after this season but whether she uses both remains to be seen, especially given her plans to attend medical school.

Still, there's one thing Kyle doesn't have to worry about when it comes to one of the best players on her team: the transfer portal.

"Now that," Kyle says with a laugh, "would be a surprise."



Gary D'Amato, a three-time National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association sportswriter of the year in Wisconsin, joined the Milwaukee Panthers as a feature writer for the Roar Report in September 2018.





Mort Sayyed

WHEN THE PANTHERS ARE YOUR PASSION

The "Roar Report" sat down recently with Mort Sayyed, who graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with his degree in Finance & Marketing in 2004 before going on to obtain his master's degree from the Lubar School of Business in Business Analytics in 2007. Sayyed is a successful Wisconsin-born entrepreneur who is the CEO of locally-based Minlopro Partners, a Salesforce consulting firm headquartered in Milwaukee.

Sayyed has been a fan of the Panthers since his undergrad days, with his pride and involvement continuing to grow over the years. He is now a corporate sponsor of the program as well.

He laughs when he thinks back on it: a Milwaukee-area kid choosing the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee because of proximity and cost – not because of sports.

"No, absolutely not, I did not come here for sports," he recalls of his college choice. "That was not the motivation. The motivation was, it was a local school, so I could stay close to home. It made my parents feel comfortable. This was, I mean, 1999. We didn't really do a ton of research. Just wanted to go to college and was the one that was affordable, and the one that was up the road. And it worked out awesome."



But once he got to campus, the Panther experience found him anyway.

"I started to see other students go to the games at the K (Klotsche Center) and then every now and then go to the Cell (the then-U.S. Cellular Arena/ now UWM Panther Arena)," he said. "It's like, 'ah, that sounds like fun', you know, hop on a bus and go with your buddies. Like a social thing, right? I was not trying to watch the high-flying Panthers. I mean, that was not the motivation. The motivation was, all my friends are doing it, it's Tuesday night with nothing else to do. Let's go do something fun. How do you stay entertained? And it was a blast. These games are a blast. You went there with your buddies. I couldn't even tell you half the scores, just out there with your friends."

That first season on campus the team went 15-13 under then-head coach Bo Ryan, but things started to progress quickly. Ryan moved on to a new job with the

Badgers and Bruce Pearl quickly turned the Panthers into a real juggernaut, a version of "can't-miss" entertainment.

"Next thing I know, we are winning the conference, winning the league tournament," he recalled. "I remember getting to rush the court, still distinctly remember that. The energy was so vibrant, because the energy was driven by the students. We had kind of captured something special. But I don't remember the history, who we played ... I don't remember the scores. I remember the experience. I remember the moment, how it felt. That's really what I remember."

His last year as an undergrad? ... the Panthers made national headlines by making their historic run to the "Sweet 16" in the NCAA Tournament.

"So, I'm privileged, right? I went through our 'platinum era' of the program and it was easy for me to fall in love with the team," he said. "But the reality is that was

20 years ago, and I still love the team. Because I think what happens is there's this connection that I've never lost."

Big picture, that Panther team holds a special place in a lot of people's memories. A good portion of the players that comprised the roster are still regulars in attendance at games and involved in one way or another with the program to this day.

Life pulled Sayyed away after graduation—work, moving abroad, time in Barcelona, Sydney, as well as Utah. He didn't go to many games, but the tether never snapped.

"Even now, when I talk to alumni who don't go to games, when we reminisce, we all reminisce about the same thing," Sayyed said. "It's just that I just never lost that connection other people have. But it was easy for me. I could have lost it, because after college, I got into work, I didn't really go to a lot of games. I

traveled; I lived abroad for a while. But I always found myself checking score lines randomly, or you talk to your old college buddy, and it's 'you remember when we were in the Gasthaus and we beat Boston College', you know, it's these anchor points that were just waiting for you to pull on. And I just made a decision to pull on them. And a lot of my friends who were very involved, who I go to games with, they also all pulled on the same anchor points. Everything was there. But I never came to Milwaukee for the sports. I'm not a basketball guy. I never played basketball. I don't know the plays. If you ever hear me yelling from the court, I'm just yelling. That's not my thing ... I played soccer. Even when I left Milwaukee, I wasn't overly involved in this, in the sports, until I started to kind of find myself slowly back."

For him, the pivotal moment was moving back to the area. He was ready to lock back in and, essentially, start his life. When he moved back to Milwaukee about a decade ago, the first thing he did was simple: "Let's go to a Panther game."

It happened to be 2014—the Panthers' unlikely NCAA Tournament year—and that was enough to pull him back in. Then it became part of life.

"One of the first things I did, was reach out to my buddies and say, 'let's go catch a Panther game' and lo and behold," Sayyed recalled.

That 2013-14 campaign ended with a run to the title as the

five seed, heading back to the NCAA Tournament with a victory over Wright State in the Horizon League Tournament Championship game. "When we went to the tournament, it was very easy to get pulled back in," he said. "But then it just became a thing that we did, right? Where it's like, what do you do? 'Let's go to a Panther game'. It's in Milwaukee. It's downtown. You go to a bar before, you go to a bar after, there's a basketball game in the middle. Now our calendar plans are around Panther Basketball. When we do family events, it's a 'when' ... when are we going to a Panther game as a family? When I am having my Milwaukee boy's night out, it will be anchored on a Panther game. Now it has become a focal point of our entertainment. I still don't know much about basketball ... I should really pay more attention [laughs]. But the joy that comes from it is a shared joy. You'll never see me sitting by the court by myself watching the game. I'm not a connoisseur of the sport. I'm a connoisseur of the experience that it provides."

Sayyed continued to have opportunities to up his involvement ... and did exactly that.

"As we were talking about earlier ... what do you want to do with your life? For me, when I see these basketball players, I think a lot of people look at them, they're like, 'Oh, this guy is six-foot-nine'," he said. "But these are kids. I know that because I was their age, and the way they behave is that same way I behaved back then. The only difference is they're just really tall and playing basketball and I wasn't. But our brain is no different, except I think they're under a lot more pressure than I ever was to perform and be in the spotlight and play for your education."

For Sayyed, it has always come down to what he can do personally to help.

"You put that pressure on me, I would have folded," he said about today's players in the NIL (Name, Image, and Likeness) age. "These guys aren't folding. For me, getting more involved now is



about, how can I help these kids? What can I do for them? Even if it's just hosting a Christmas party or being at the game and high-fiving them at the end. Or being able to give a locker room speech to get them excited about what happens after college."

He takes that next-level as well, with the internship program he has created inside of his business. Former Panthers are certainly a high-priority when it comes to helping with opportunities in the real world.

"We created the internship program so they know that, hey, there are alumni who care about them off the court," he said. "I've gotten more involved because I want these kids, and the program, to know there are alumni who are willing to support them beyond the sport. Because I'm not a basketball guy. I love my school, and I love my Panthers. For example, I can't help them play in Turkey (professionally). But I can help with an internship. I can help them with a job. I've got four athletes right now at Minlopro. I want them to know there's life after sports. And with

an education from Milwaukee, there's a life with us. Right now, we've got four, but I want to hire eight. I want to hire 20. Athletes are amazing employees; they're incredible. They're so easy to mold into what you need. And they never lose. They just hustle. So, getting more involved has been letting the students know there's life for you after this, if you really want it."

Sayyed used former Panther men's basketball player Angelo Stuart as a prime example. Stuart was a junior college All-American prior to playing for the Panthers for two seasons, wrapping up his time at the end of the 2023-24 campaign. A student-athlete who lived and breathed basketball since he first picked up a ball when he was a kid.

"One of the most interesting conversations I ever had was with Angelo, and because when he finished, he had his MBA, and he could have played overseas," Sayyed said. "I told him, 'Jello, you should go play (overseas).' And he said he didn't want to, even after I told him, 'When else are you going to get to travel the

world?'. And he replied, 'Mort, I'm going to get a job. I'm going to make money and then travel the world on my own terms'.

Sayyed continued the conversation with Stuart and asked if he wanted to continue playing. That's just what he figured basketball players do.

"He told me 'No, I've played my entire life, I'm good'. And for me, that really clicked," Sayyed said. "I had the assumption that every one of these guys wants to die on the basketball court, because that's what they love. And the reality is, they don't. They're like, hey, I've gotten this far. I've had an incredible experience. I am not going to be an international basketball star. I'm ready to start my life, because there is life after basketball. I can help them. I can create the next step for them. I can create for them after sports, whether it's immediately after or a year after or five years. If I can help them then that's my goal."

And the experience eventually turned into involvement—first as a donor, then a sponsor, then

someone deeply connected to the student-athletes themselves.

"So, I became a donor before I had my business," he said. "I think part of it is ... one, you have to have the financial wherewithal. I mean, let's be honest about this, right? If you're struggling to survive, you're not going to be donating your money to your college. So, I was lucky enough to have a career that gave me the financial ability to do some of that. But even I remember distinctly, early on, I was donating like 25 bucks a year. You know that what's the lowest box? [laughs] I remember I would always get a call from the school, like twice a year, so I would always 'Oh, 25 bucks, 50 bucks, whatever'. So even when I didn't have a lot of money, I would always donate. But I think it flipped for me when I realized that I could see where the money was going. I could see the impact of it. I could see that the students were getting experiences. You realize that the donation you make isn't a financial donation, it's a life experience, and that's what I was able to see, because the program kept me involved. That legacy that you can leave with these simple actions, I think is worth one hundred times more than the money you donate."

He compares it to a pay-it-forward chain—one gesture, multiplied through lives and moments. He spoke of a recent conversation with one of his company co-founders, who had just visited Chick-fil-A. When he got to the point of buying the meal, he was told someone had paid for him. So, he decided to pay for the car



behind him and, after asking, found out he was car No. 13 in the chain.

"Being able to have that positive impact on someone's life, and then they may pay it forward," he said. "Can you imagine the impact a small donation can make? Let's say you donate money as an alumnus and that money is used to give an experience to an athlete who's never had it before, and that person starts to change, and now what you've done is impacted numerous iterations of that downstream. How insane is that? And all that can start from a simple donation."

The connection to the program didn't arrive all at once—it grew in the small moments that stacked quietly into something meaningful. It then took much bigger steps with the arrival of head coach **Bart Lundy** in March of 2022.

"Transparently, my relationship is anchored with (Milwaukee Director of Athletics) **Amanda Braun**," Sayyed said. "Amanda is my go-to. We talk a lot; we

text. So, she's the one who kept me from floating away at the start, but Bart is just pulling me right in right because I love his charisma. He hates to lose, just like me. When you challenge him, he always answers the call. Just like I see a lot of similarities in the way we approach life and problem-solving. Also, I think he's just a really good leader. I think he sees the players as kids and wants to be a role model. Bart is a high-character guy and that's very attractive to me. He wants to influence these kids' lives in a positive way. Amanda's my anchor point in the program, but Bart is who's made me plan all of our social events around basketball games, because I love the product. I love the product on the court; the product is fun. You see guys running up and down playing full-court press, and now, by the way, I know what the full-court press is ... I had to google it – thank you ChatGPT (laughs). But yeah, so I think he has brought an element of fun on the court that's easy to come watch. And he's a really good guy."





a simple effort for Sayyed — nothing more than a quiet start, almost easy to overlook. But over time, it expanded. Each season added another layer, each experience revealing something new, until the once-modest beginning became a defining part of who he is and what he does today.

"I went on this mission and told Amanda, maybe six or seven years ago, that I was going to go out every year and find two people to buy season tickets," he said. "And I have done that since. I brought people to the program and they bought season tickets. And that was a personal goal. And then I realized, wow,

this is cool. It's impactful. It not only helps fill some seats, but I want to get alumni to understand the relationship between their donation and the outcome, because that's what changed me. When I was able to connect the dollar to the outcome."

As the years passed, looking beyond the usual began to bring different results.

"Now I focus on the outcome, not the dollar," he said. "What brings a smile to the kids' faces? It can be just something as simple as sponsoring the Christmas party. Yeah, there is a cost involved, but get three, four alumni involved, and now you get face time with the players. You get face time with the coaching staff, with the AD ... how else can you get that? So, getting them to understand that these donations ... it's not the dollar, it's the impact of it. Come watch a player smile. Come get two hours with a coach. Come get an hour with the AD. Getting them to understand that connection. That's my new journey, right?"

His new perspective has given Sayyed what he calls his 'new mission'.

"That's it ... how do you get people to understand that we have to stop fixating on the dollar. Fixate on the outcome. Is the outcome worth it? Focus on impact. Are you excited about the outcome? Does having an hour of uninterrupted time with the head coach of a division one basketball program that has had 20 wins a year the last four years, is that something that's worth your time? Is that the outcome

you want? I think that connection is what I'm hoping to build with alumni."

He stays steadfast in wanting other alumni to understand what he has learned: don't obsess over the dollar amount—focus on the impact. "If you realize the outcomes are really powerful, then the money justifies it," he said. "I don't necessarily want every alum to start donating 10 bucks. I want 10 of them and I to start donating \$100,000. That's the goal—get them excited about the outcome, so then they separate from the money." He pauses, trying to put into words what this program means to him at this moment in time. This is a man who now displays a Panther tattoo proudly on his arm.

"I think that is something I wasn't prepared for," he said. "I didn't think it'd be like this, to be honest with you. But now, I mean, I think about Panthers all the time — I cannot wait for the basketball season. I talk about basketball. I have text message friends about basketball. We know the rosters. We know who our best players are. This is now a thing that we do together. It wasn't a thing we did together before. That was a very interesting journey. I don't know how it happened, but now that it's here, it's not ... it's never going to not stay this way. And I think that would be really fascinating for alumni to discover. Maybe it's an age thing. Maybe you get older and just hold on to something. Now, for me, it is such a tight connection I can't even fathom being disconnected again. It is now a lifelong connection."

What began as casual support for Sayyed years ago soon became a meaningful presence around the team, shaping relationships that now stretch well beyond the sidelines.

"Maybe I'm like a crazy cat lady with the Panthers," he joked. "But once you get to this level, it's so fulfilling. The Panthers fulfill my life. The athletic program is a part of my life. I bring my family to events. My kids talk about Pounce. They want to see pictures of Pounce; meet Pounce again. I'm not just an alum; I am part of the program. I'm here and I am a part of it in my own way. I don't get a paycheck from the school or anything, but I'm part of it now, and I can't even fathom not being a part of it."

Time doesn't slow for anyone. But little by little, the team became more than just a game to watch for Sayyed and his family. Before he even realized it, that casual interest from years ago had transformed into a true passion.

"When you ask, how did I get here? It's a mystery, because I can't think of life before this," he said. "You have to find your passion. And the Panthers are my passion. Whether I'm here or not here, whether I'm sitting courtside or not, whether I'm watching it on TV, or whether I'm checking the score on an airplane. It's just a part of me now, and it just happened because I allowed it to happen. When you get involved once and you're good, then it's a forever thing."



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PANTHER PALE ALE FROM PILOT PROJECT BREWING

For the third consecutive year, Pilot Project Brewing, in conjunction with Milwaukee Athletics, welcomed its Panther beer last month – launched for the 2025-26 season with a new design.

The “Panther Pale Ale”, an American pale ale beer, will make its first appearance in a new can design this week to celebrate the multi-part collaboration in time for the holiday season.

An officially licensed product, the beer was first developed two years ago in partnership between Pilot Project Brewing, Craft Beverage Warehouse, Milwaukee Athletics, the UWM Peck School of the Arts, and CLC, the University’s trademark licensing company. Today marks the beginning of the third straight year of the multi-part collaboration.

Fans and customers looking to purchase the product can now find it at:
Discount Liquor
Consumer Beverage
Beans and Barley
Major Goolsby’s
Ian’s Pizza

The cans made their debut and are now available to the public for the first time at UWM Panther Arena for the men’s basketball contest against Robert Morris December 6. The person who purchases the 100th can of Panther Pale Ale that evening at the game against the Colonials will win a \$100 gift card to Pilot Project Brewing.

Director of Athletics **Amanda Braun** and General Manager for Milwaukee Panther Sports Properties **Kristina Filipovic** helped move the process to once again bring the concept to market, through the work that current Panther Athletics staff members and University leadership put into this concept to make it a reality.

“We are pleased to continue this unique partnership with Pilot Project Brewing, Craft Beverage

Warehouse and the Peck School of the Arts,” Braun said. “This project showcases a true collaboration across campus and across the Milwaukee business community by providing student designers a real-world experience. The can design elements creatively reinforces this partnership by featuring campus and city landmarks.”

A portion of the proceeds from the sale of the beer will be directed to student scholarships and other student-centered programming at UWM.

Macy Franti of Gillett, Wis., and a Design and Visual Communications Bachelor of Fine Arts major at UWM, created the artwork that was selected to appear on the product. Her winning design was one of numerous submissions made by UW-Milwaukee Peck School of the Arts students that worked its way through the approval process.

“I’m beyond grateful for the opportunity to represent UWM and PSOA in this collaboration with Panther Athletics, Pilot Project Brewing, and Craft Beverage Warehouse,” Franti said. “The skills and experiences I’ve gained as a student at UWM have encouraged me to visualize the connection between our campus and community. The design acts as a collage illustrating the iconic elements

that make Milwaukee our home. It captures the lively feeling of being surrounded by the city that leaves lasting impressions on students, alumni, and community members. UWM has given students like me a strong foundation to grow creatively and explore all the opportunities Milwaukee has to offer.”

Robert Grame, the Co-Area Head and Associate Professor, Department of Art & Design – Peck School of the Arts, was also happy to share in the process.

“We are excited to once again have students in Art 329, Package Design, participate in this fantastic project activity,” Grame said. “This year’s selection, completed by Macy Franti, continues to build on the outstanding design work that has been on display over the last three years we have been a part of the project.”

The product will be available for purchase at UWM Panther Arena, Pilot Project Brewing and other select bars/restaurants and liquor stores in the greater Milwaukee area. Any retailers interested in carrying Panther Pale Ale should reach out to Sales@PilotProjectBrewing.com.

“Pilot Project is so happy to partner with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for a third year!” Pilot Project Co-Founder and CEO **Dan Abel** said. “Putting the can design project in the hands of the student in the classroom is what makes this program truly stand out. As a beverage incubator headquartered in Milwaukee, we’re proud to be a part of something different that puts entrepreneurial influence in the hands of brilliant creatives. The UWM partnership lets us do just that!”

Craft Beverage Warehouse is again printing the cans and packaging for the product, one with a design that came directly from students at the UWM Peck School of the Arts, while CLC was involved with officially licensing the product and signing the agreement with Pilot to allow for the brand on the beer.

Craft Beverage Warehouse (CBW) is once again thrilled to support UWM’s Panther Pale Ale project,” CBW President and Co-Founder **Kyle Stephens** said. “Collaborating with our local institutions and directly with students in the classroom provides a real-world opportunity to understand what it takes to bring a beverage to the market. As a local business run by and employing several UWM graduates, it’s pretty cool to see this product on the shelves and crack one open at a ball game.”

Stephens, a UWM graduate, is thrilled to be a part of the collaboration once again.

Pilot Project Brewing is a brewery incubator & restaurant located in the Brewery District of Milwaukee, Wis., Pilot Project was launched as a collaborative and artistically curious space to help support talented brewers in an industry with exceptionally high barriers. Modeled after the music industry, Pilot serves as a launch pad for start-up breweries, offering assistance with recipe R&D, production scaling, marketing, distribution and more.





Few athletes in Milwaukee history have resumes as impressive as **Natalie Block's**. A national qualifier and Second Team All-American in the 400m hurdles, Block is also a two-time regional qualifier and a multi-time Horizon League champion in the 60m, 100m, and 400m hurdles, with additional titles in both the 400m and the pentathlon. She has earned multiple Outstanding Performer of the Meet honors and is a three-time Alfreeda Goff Athlete of the Year. Add in back-to-back Milwaukee Female Student-Athlete of the Year awards and 15 Horizon League Athlete of the Week selections, and it is clear why Block is one of the most decorated Panthers ever to step on the track.

Going into her final collegiate season, the Roar Report sat down with Block to discuss her future and professional athlete aspirations:

THE FINAL SEASON

What is your confidence level going into this final season with the Panthers?

Block: I would say my confidence is fine. I'm just giving it to you God at this point. I'm just going to roll with that, you know, because there's almost nothing else to say. He's got it.

Did earning All-American status last season change your goals or expectations for this season?

Block: No. Of course I want to push my abilities. So, I think this will naturally place me higher in the NCAA rankings. Goals are naturally what I've set from myself. I don't know if the All-American status really changed my perspective. I think it was a nice little addition. My goal is executing what I need to execute, so I can get the sponsorship from the brand. I need to somehow get seen by brands. That's the ultimate goal. It's just making sure I get the viewership from whatever brand supports me right and sees the discipline that I have. Even with all the injuries and setbacks that I've had, I'm still going.

Does this final season feel different from the others?

Block: No...I know Milwaukee is home. Milwaukee is by my name always and that is not going to change.

MOTIVATION AND IDENTITY

What motivates you to be great?

Block: "I feel like there was a point in life where I decided that something had to change. I knew what that change and lifestyle should be, and it pointed to track. I got so addicted to it and so motivated to improve ... having discipline is going to beat the talent every single time."

Has overcoming adversity changed how you see competition or your identity as an athlete?

Block: I'm starting to realize that training is not supposed to be too exhausting. There are times that you're going to have to dig. Don't get me wrong. You're going to face some trialing times, but I think I have changed my perspective because of that. I changed in that I understand taking care of my body. I got so low, and it reminded me that there are phases and seasons to you as a person. Heading into this season, I think I know God a little bit better. Better than if were to be asked questions about him two years ago. I would definitely thank him for the adversity, I have this gift and I get to run; that is super important to me.

Was there ever a specific moment when you questioned whether you'd keep going? What pushed you through?

Block: When I had my major injury and had surgery done, it did make me question things. With that injury, I feel like questions came about because of all the adversities. Is this telling me that this career is not going to work? Is this a shift in my path? I want my job to be running track, and I'm going to accomplish that however long that takes. This past year, it got pretty intense. I finally made nationals, but then I came up short and had the surgery. I come back this year, make nationals and place 12th. I took a lot of pride in that. But there are professionals that are faster than me. I just have to keep growing. With these injuries, setbacks, and health concerns, I felt like I put a lot above my faith in God. God gave me these gifts, and I am still getting the next opportunity to run again. It is meant for me because he hasn't taken it away. Yes, I got injured, but that doesn't mean it was taken away. It made me recircle back to him and understand that he's the one in charge. I'm not the one that is going to force it. It's not me to do that. That's going to be on him.

**BUILT ON BELIEF:
NATALIE BLOCK'S JOURNEY FORWARD**



COACHING AND TURNING POINTS

What role has Coach Basler played in your resilience and growth during your Milwaukee career?

Block: "Basler has always been there for me, and he has helped me a lot throughout my career. I was originally a multi-event athlete, and I've been coached by Basler for so long. He wasn't going to have me switch coaches when I switched to hurdles because he knows me so well as an athlete. I always told Basler that I'm a fighter. I'm going to fight through adversity, and he would take my word for it. He would say, 'I'm not going to let you give up on this one' and 'I'm going to have you fight through this'. That is something that has always stuck with me. I know I have a good coach by my side."

When did you first know you could compete with some of the best athletes in the country? Was there a specific moment?

Block: There was a changing moment that I had during my freshman year at Milwaukee. It was a breakthrough moment for being a freshman in the Horizon League because I was a multi at that time. I was having the load of the heptathlon and the hurdle events on the side. I remember I was seeded sixth or something in the 100 hurdles and I just popped off and I won. Coach Basler just freaked out. He was like, 'this is going to be good'. I think that was when that started rolling. With track in general, the switch just flipped junior year of high school when I made state. I think that it flipped then from a life standpoint.

THE FUTURE AND PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS

What does the next step in your career look like after Milwaukee?

Block: I'm going to have to walk blindly. I have been on LinkedIn reaching out to people and making connections. I'm going to trust God's timing when he's going to insert that and when it's right for me. I do truly believe that when that time comes, it'll present itself. Life has those ways of just working out like that. I believe that it'll work out somehow. It's all our first shots at life. You just have to figure it out and keep praying.

Do you expect your work ethic or approach to change when transitioning from college to professional track?

Block: It might be a little bit easier...not as much pressure because the collegiate season just forces you to keep going every single weekend. Once I enter the professional world, I can really prioritize my health. You can enter competitions based on where you are in your training phase. It enhances the details of things. A lot of schools just run these athletes into the ground, but Coach Basler doesn't. He's going to do what it takes. We always focus on our end goal: USAs, and then we work backwards. So, with that, spring is our main goal.

If you had to pitch yourself to a future agent, what would you say?

Block: Look at my timeline and my progression. Look at how I faced all the difficulties and the injuries and how I still stepped onto the line with the professionals, with the top athletes. I'm coming from not as big of a school compared to other athletes. Look at what I have faced and how far I've come.

What are you most excited about for life after this season both on and off the track?

Block: I would really like to have a brand by my side. In worst case, if God decided that the timing is not right, we'll have it at a certain time. I'd rather have a brand that truly supports me and loves me and sees the goals I have for myself. Through networking, I met with a guy, and he said, 'I've literally just met you and I just feel it seeping out of you'. I want them to see that because that is how I am. I'm not going to give up on it.

HER LEGACY

What do you hope people will remember about you long after your last race in a Milwaukee uniform?

Block: I didn't give up.





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Johnson Keland Management Inc.
Travis and Angela Egge
Don Draper Dummy Trust
William and Maureen Carollo
Karey Blaszyk
Kathryn and Robert Berkley



Being a part of the Panther Excellence Fund is not only an investment in the athletic program and student-athletes of Milwaukee, it also provides many benefits for you. The Panther Excellence Fund is excited to announce the following benefits for donors who support the Panthers (beginning in the 2024-25 academic year). Benefits will be awarded according to athletics annual gifts and will be available to Panther Excellence Fund members the following sports/academic year.

For more information or to hear about opportunities to get involved with Milwaukee Athletics, please contact Zach Beaschler (beaschle@uwm.edu).

Membership is based on TOTAL ANNUAL GIVING to Athletics

MEMBERSHIP LEVEL	PANTHER PARTNER	BLACK	GOLD	STARTER	CAPTAIN	ALL-CONFERENCE	ALL-AMERICAN	MVP	CHAMPION	HALL OF FAME
Annual Gift Amount	\$100 - \$249	\$250 - \$499	\$500 - \$999	\$1,000 - \$1,499	\$1,500 - \$2,499	\$2,500 - \$4,999	\$5,000 - \$7,499	\$7,500 - \$9,999	\$10,000 - \$24,999	\$25,000+
Monthly Gift Amount	\$8 - \$21	\$21 - \$42	\$42 - \$84	\$84 - \$125	\$125 - \$208	\$208 - \$416	\$416 - \$625	\$625 - \$833	\$833 - \$2,083	\$2,083+
Provide critical financial support to MKE student-athletes	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Quarterly Newsletter Access	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Fall Sports Pass (except MBB/WBBL)		M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Road Report Recognition			M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Video Board Spotlight				M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Priority Ticket Access + Parking Pass					M	M	M	M	M	M
Premium Hospitality Access						M	M	M	M	M
Premium Gift Package							M	M	M	M
Closed Practice Experience								M	M	M
Exclusive Experience with AD/Coach									M	M
VIP Travel Experience										M

Panther Excellence Fund year runs from July 1 - June 30 each year
*Annual payments must be submitted by November 1 to qualify for ticket benefits

ALL-SPORTS PASS

Pass gives you access to all home sporting events in 2023-24 (except men's and women's basketball)

CLOSED PRACTICE EXPERIENCE

Invitation to a closed practice which includes interaction with players and coaches afterward

PREMIUM HOSPITALITY ACCESS

Gain entry into exclusive hospitality areas at different sports and events throughout the year

EXCLUSIVE EXPERIENCE WITH AD/COACH

A customized experience with either a coach or Director of Athletics (i.e. golf, dinner, private team outing, etc.)

PREMIUM GIFT PACKAGE

Receive a personalized, customized one-of-a-kind Panther gift package

VIP TRAVEL EXPERIENCE

Join the team on a road trip and be involved in all aspects of team itinerary

Membership level can include a combination of the Excellence Fund, Sports Specific, Per-Seat Premium, Capital Projects, and Scholarships



EXAMPLES

Jon Smith makes a donation as part of his two men's basketball season tickets (\$790) and attends the MBB golf outing. It puts him at \$1,090



Carrie attends the WBB golf outing and gives \$250 to the excellence fund. Her total giving would be \$450



*Please contact Zach Beaschler (beaschle@uwm.edu) if you would like to opt out of having your name acknowledged.



#FORTHEMKE