

SIUE athletics makes a positive impact



Brad Hewitt

Posted: Friday, November 11, 2016 10:59 am Segue • Logan Cameron |

Segue leaves it all on the court this week, as Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Chancellor Dr. Randy Pembroke, welcomes Brad Hewitt, SIUE director of athletics. The administrators discuss what makes SIUE student-athletes academically unique from others, and the successes and hardships of SIUE's transition from NCAA Division II to an NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics program. They also describe characteristics of NCAA Division I athletics programs and their student-athletes, how SIUE supports its student-athletes to encourage growth on and off the court, the development of intense rivalries between SIUE and other universities across sports, and how the Cougar Excellence Fund supports SIUE Athletics and its programs.

A familiar face on campus since becoming SIUE assistant director of athletics in 1989, Hewitt has served as director of athletics since 2002. He has held several positions at SIUE, including acting chief executive officer of the SIUE Foundation, acting vice chancellor of university relations, acting director of the alumni association, assistant vice chancellor of university relations, assistant vice chancellor for athletic development, and adjunct graduate professor in the Department of Applied Health. With Hewitt's leadership and determination, SIUE achieved NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics status in 2012 through a process that began in fall 2007.

While Hewitt has had many notable achievements in his time at SIUE, he credits much of the department's success to the quality of the athletics staff.

"Quality people make the difference," he shares. "We actively recruit our staff to find people who share the University's mission, vision and values, and push that even further to find people with a passion to make a difference in student-athletes' lives, and who care about the values of hard work, accountability, and responsibility. When you have those kinds of people, you're able to surpass what most people could do in a work day.

"We make sure our people understand the department's culture, and those values and expectations. The student-athletes and their education come first. Everybody in our program wants to win. Nobody is as competitive as we are. But we know what the focus is."

That departmental focus has gained national notoriety, with SIUE ranking first in the state and seventh in the nation among Division I intercollegiate athletics programs in student-athlete graduation rate. In addition, SIUE student-athletes have achieved a combined grade point average above 3.0 for 20 consecutive semesters.

"That's a culmination of the product we bring in and the coaches' commitment to that," Hewitt explains. "We are always seeking recruits, who care about their education, and see it as a stepping stone to the rest of their life, while also having the opportunity to continue playing the sport they love and have grown up with.

"The entire institution is committed to supporting the success of our student-athletes. Just like a parent, we support student-athletes by utilizing the institution's services and having committed people in our department, to ensure our student-athletes are held accountable and have high expectations for themselves. We look student-athletes and their parents right in the eyes and stress, 'We won't jeopardize your ability to compete as a starter and have a great career, but education will come first.'"

Having now proven itself as a Division I program, SIUE most values its achievement of staying true to the University's commitment toward student-athlete experience, welfare and academic success, while competing at the highest level. The program also takes great pride in its community involvement initiatives, with SIUE athletics teams combining for nearly 15,000 hours of community service last year.

Hewitt further discusses the difference in athletic programs between NCAA divisions, and common misperceptions of intercollegiate athletics and their impact on college campuses.

"The general public understands the NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletic industry, for lack of a better term, from the perspective of those approximately 75 universities who are part of the 'Power Five,' the 'FBS (Football Bowl Subdivision),' or other major conference labels, because they're covered by the media more than anybody else," Hewitt shares. "The reality is there are 310 other NCAA Division I institutions who are significantly different, in many ways.

"Most programs are much more similar to Division II and Division III programs. Division III has core values of student-athlete experience and opportunity. Division II combines financial aid with those same experiences. Division I represents the same values, but then adds a few more resources.

"Being a Division I student-athlete typically means they have gifts of being a little bigger, faster and stronger with athletic skills and practice habits that are a bit superior. The margin of difference in these student-athletes between NCAA divisions is not much. It's the depth and number of athletes who can perform at the level that is a big difference.

"Student-athletes have an important and positive impact on an institution's brand. They draw the public and alumni to visit campus, and create pride in their institution. Yet because of negative connotations seen in the media, many people don't see intercollegiate athletics as having value in higher education. In reality, that negativity is a small percentage of what's out there."

With SIUE teams now competing in the Ohio Valley Conference, the Missouri Valley Conference and the Southern Conference, Hewitt and Pembroke discuss the traditional and evolving sports rivalries that have been characteristic of SIUE's story of excellence for decades. Those rivalries will be intensified during the 2016-17 season as SIUE Athletics has 14 television broadcasts scheduled – three of which will be on national outlets.

Leading a program dedicated to becoming a lifelong support system for student-athletes, Hewitt concludes by discussing the SIUE Athletics Hall of Fame. Established in 2005, the SIUE Athletics Hall of Fame and its associated banquet showcase SIUE's many historically outstanding athletic talents.

"To see the expressions on former athletes' faces when they come back to this campus, they're just wowed – not just by the athletics facilities, but the entire campus," Hewitt says. "All of those positive emotions start flowing, and they get excited about being back here.

"This year was unique for me, because we've now placed a couple athletes and a team in the Hall of Fame that I actually knew well from when I first started at SIUE. The most rewarding thing is when a former student-athlete walks up to you and says, 'You were a major difference in my life, and I believe some of my success is due to my experience at SIUE.' That makes it all worthwhile – you know you've made a difference."

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By Logan Cameron, SIUE Marketing & Communications