

KARA: Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today we have a chance to talk to Dan Butterly. Dan is an alum of the School of Kinesiology and Recreation and currently serves as the Commissioner of the Big West Conference and NCAA division one Athletic Conference based in California. Welcome and thank you for being here.

DAN: It's great to be here. Kara, excited to talk to you today.

KARA: This will be fun. Let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

DAN: Well, interestingly, I actually started off at Eastern Illinois University because I'd gone to so many summer camps in Charleston during my high school career, but realized that Eastern Illinois wasn't the right fit for me, and I actually had a number of my high school friends that were going to Illinois State talk to me about Illinois State, visited and just fell in love with the campus and the people, and transferred to Illinois State after my first semester.

KARA: So when you transferred in, did you transfer in as a KNR student? How did you find your major?

DAN: I actually transferred in as a political science and journalism major. I wanted to be more the Dan Rather of the evening news, you know, newspaper reporter type individual. But you know, really, I started getting involved the second day I was on campus, the beginning of my sophomore year, literally wanted to be the new basketball coach at Illinois State had just gotten hired. Bob Bender had just gotten hired during the spring, and I had sent a letter of interest in becoming a statistician for the basketball program Illinois State. And actually they said, when you get back on campus, come see us. After a couple hour interview, I was hired to be the head basketball manager at Illinois State for the men's basketball program. I absolutely fell in love doing what I was doing. Realized that I could make a career out of doing what I was doing in college athletics, and that's what had me change my major over to at the time, was the HP ERD department, now known as Kinesiology and Recreation.

KARA: And what I love about your story is, you know, all of our majors in the College of Applied Science and Technology are commonly bound by the fact that they're applied, and they give students that opportunity out of the classroom. But it's funny, because yours

actually happened before you found the classroom, right? You got that hands on experience that really helped you find your passion. I think that's really cool.

DAN: 100% Kara, you're correct. And that's what I love about the College of Applied Sciences technologies, because it was very much hands on. Once I transferred over to the college and started taking classes and realized I was more experiential learning than I was just book learning, and that's really the way I like to learn, and just fell in love with what I was doing.

KARA: Well, it sounds like you found the best fit for you. What do you miss the most about your time on campus?

DAN: There's so many things I miss, you know, obviously the friends that I made on campus. I you know, miss Kevin Burke, Dr Kauf. I go down the list of great professors that I still remember, and I remember what they taught me at Illinois State, and then obviously also the men's basketball program, and just being in the in the athletic department, the great coaches we had at Illinois State and the amazing people, amazing athletes that we had at Illinois State, that we- I just became friends with so many student athletes that were on the swimming and diving team, the football program, obviously the men's and women's basketball programs. So there's so many great things about campus I miss, and it's amazing to see the growth of campus since I've been there.

KARA: And so tell us, how did your work from the sidelines of the basketball court take you to being commissioner of the Big West Conference? What did that career path look like for you?

DAN: That's an amazing step, isn't it? I mean, to go from the head basketball manager of the men's basketball program at Illinois State to become a commissioner of a division one Athletic Conference. It really- being the men's basketball manager really helped propel me in that opportunity. I graduated Illinois State, became an intern at the Missouri Valley Conference because of my experience in the men's basketball program at Illinois State, and obviously my degree at Illinois State helped that along the way as well. But turn that internship at the Missouri Valley Conference into a full time opportunity. And was at the Missouri Valley for a little over five and a half years. Then was able to was recruited to become one of the original staff members of the Mountain West Conference, which was formed in 1999 so I was an original member of that conference. Ran basketball, then all of our external relations at the Mountain West Conference, and then back in 2020, was provided the opportunity to interview for the Big West Conference Commissioner position.

And fortunately, I think I'm the first commissioner, maybe the only Commissioner ever hired exclusively via Zoom meeting, because that was during the pandemic that I interviewed and I took. Over the commissioner of the Big West here in May of 2020, so it was, it was a journey, a lot of challenges, a lot of opportunity, but I'm blessed because it all started at Illinois State.

KARA: That's a great story. And what I love to hear is that your internship turned into a full time position, because I think that's the dream of every student starting an internship, right? So can you tell us what advice do you have for students starting internships to help make themselves indispensable to a team like that?

DAN: That's an excellent question. Karen, I love that question when students actually ask me that question. One of the things I did when I was at the Missouri Valley, it was going to be Doug Elton, who was the commissioner of the Missouri Valley at the time, told me. He said, I'm bringing on three interns, and I'm going to hire one of those interns full time for a full time position here at the at the office. So it was, you know, a little bit of competition, which is what you want in college athletics and sports anyway. You love to compete. But one of the things I did was take you on. I recommend this to any interns looking for that full time opportunity where they're interning is take advantage of every opportunity to take on more responsibility. I called myself the garbage can. In many ways, there's responsibilities that people did not want to do, or they said, Man, I can't believe I got to do this today. I said, Hey, I'd love to take it at that opportunity and learn from doing it. So I really worked to try to make myself indispensable, made sure I did my primary responsibilities exceptionally well, but also anything else I could take on or prove that I could do the job with other senior staff members at the Missouri Valley Conference office, was what helped me get that full time opportunity, and that's what I keep telling students, grab as much experience as you can while you have the opportunities to do so.

KARA: Be a garbage can. I love that. Thank you for that takeaway. That's a great mentality. And now in your role, what would you describe as the favorite part of your job?

DAN: I think, more than anything, every day in college athletics, particularly at the NCAA division one level, there's challenges that you do not know you're going to face when you walk in the office every day and you have to learn, you have to lead by the experience that you gain throughout your career. And I think that's what I love about this job every day. I love being able to interact with student athletes. We don't get to do that as much in a conference office as you do at an institutional level. That is one thing I miss about being on campus, is the interaction you have with student athletes on a day to day basis. But when

you have that opportunity, you take advantage of the opportunities to talk to student athletes, to find out how their experience is. And my, my mission and my, you know, what I've got on my wall here in the Big West office is, you know, how do we continue to improve the student athlete experience in our conference? So those are the things that I look forward to every day, the challenges that await, and to see how collectively the team that I've assembled here how we can address those challenges and keep us moving forward.

KARA: What do you consider to be the most challenging thing about your job?

DAN: I think, in this current setting, is all the external forces that you cannot expect, the outcomes in many ways. Right now, in college athletics, we're dealing with a lot of judicial and legal decisions, things that are outside the opportunities that I can manage. In that respect, we're pretty much told what the outcomes are, and we have to manage those outcomes on a day-to-day basis, whether that's new things like name, image, likeness or open transfer portals. Those are things just in the last few months that continue to cause challenges in the college athletic space. And you have to continue to ebb and flow throughout your career. You know, things that you are used to doing a certain way change frequently in this business, and those are the things that I have to manage those challenges, manage expectations, continually look at the resources we have financially to continue doing the things that we need to do for our student athletes, but continue to enhance the opportunities that we have for them as well.

KARA: I think that's a great reminder that you can only control what you can control, right? And then everything else you have to leave up to those external forces. Tell us, I'm thinking about our students that are going to start internships. I'm thinking about our young alumni that are just beginning careers. How would you encourage someone to be open to those changes along the way, especially those ones that are totally out of their control?

DAN: I think more than anything, you have to have conversations. You have to you'll be able to, you know, pick up the phone and have a conversation, rather than texting, rather than emailing, you know, hiding behind sometimes the written word, developing the interpersonal relationships, having conversations in the office, seeing if, if your boss, or even if you're a younger staff member here at a conference office and you want to have lunch with the commissioner. Ask, just go in and ask, provide those opportunities, you know, to be able to ask the questions, what concerns do you have? How best to, you know, seek advice on how to deal with the changes that are coming in your roles and responsibilities. I think those are the type of things that the current generation of. Students, and my daughter is one of them, just recently graduated, that I need to continue to remind

her. Sometimes it's much easier just to pick up the phone or have a conversation than it is to text or to direct message our email. In many ways, it sometimes could be a lot quicker. Can sometimes be on point and sometimes solve, solve the problems you have without spending a lot of time going back and forth on written word.

KARA: That's a great reminder. At this point in your career, how would you describe your leadership style? My leadership style has changed, to be honest with you, Kara, over my career. I think now that I'm in the commissioner position, and I represent 11 institutions over 5000 student athletes. I'm on a number of NCAA committees at this point, a number of collegiate Commissioner Association leadership positions. You know, in this time of judicial and legal challenges that we face, I'm I find I'm much more transparent, that I'm not afraid to be able to be blunt, in some ways, to be direct with our membership as to what we face collectively. Every week, I write a blog for our membership, the leadership of our at our institutions, and whether that's the presidents and chancellors, our athletic directors, our senior women administrators and our faculty reps, which make up our council. I send every Friday what I call this week in the Big West, and it sometimes could be rather lengthy because of the things that are going on. And I know every word I write is subject to open records act through the California, Hawaii systems, but they need to know what's going on. So, I'm very open, I'm very transparent, and I'm not afraid to have the tough conversations, whereas earlier in my career, I may not have been that way.

KARA: How did you learn how to have those tough conversations? I know that's something that can feel very daunting to some people, no matter where they're at in their career. How did that become something that you became comfortable with?

DAN: I don't know if you ever get comfortable with it. I think it's more than anything to be prepared for the conversation in many ways, Kara. Do the research, try to try to understand the problem, maybe before you have the tough conversation, whether in a conference office, whether it's a why if a certain schedule came out a certain way, or an officiating issue from the night before, a sportsmanship issue, or, like I said, the legal challenges that we face right now. Having those tough conversations with our institutions to understand what the economic impact is going to be. You need to be educated. You need to research, you need to understand the frustration that could be built on one side of the ledger, one side of that conversation. Sometimes you just need to listen. And they just want somebody to hear them and for you to understand. So it's really taking the time to listen, understand, research, and then make that call, have that meeting, have that tough conversation. It's never fun, it's never easy, but if you're prepared, it can go a lot easier for you.

KARA: That's fantastic advice. Tell me, what qualities do you look for when you're making hiring decisions for your team? What stands out to you?

DAN: I think, more than anything, Carol, one of the things I look for is experience, in some ways, what type of opportunities, particularly students on campus, I always look at particularly when it's more of an entry level opportunity: What type of experience did they get while they were a student? Did they take advantage if they're interested in getting to college athletics? Did they take advantage of the opportunities while they were on campus, like I did, I went in and became the head basketball manager for three years with the men's basketball program, and did a lot, I took on a lot of responsibilities there that really provided me the opportunity to get an internship with the Missouri Valley. But, there's a number of students that want to get into college athletics that have no experience whatsoever in college athletics, and that really is a difficult challenge for those individuals to get their resumes looked at. And you know, the things I look for, though, are, sometimes they're students that have to work. You know, maybe they had to work at Jimmy John's 30 hours a week to pay for college. Those are things I take into consideration, in many ways. What type of experience did they get in those opportunities? So I'm going to look at, obviously, they got the degree, or they're getting a degree, if they're interested in an internship, what type of experience do they have for the role that I'm trying to hire here at the conference office? And then, you know, when I get to the point where I look to interview those candidates, you know, how do they represent themselves? How confident are they when they get in there, and how well do they know the organization? Those are the things I'm going to look for in a candidate early on, and then to potentially hire them in that respect, it's going to take just a little something extra, but there's a lot of things I look for, but really that experience piece is going to be what I look for primarily.

KARA: Well, and I love hearing that, because that brings us full circle talking about the importance of that applied learning. So thank you. That's a neat way to wrap up the first part of our conversation, and we are going to finish with a speed round. So I just want you to go with your first instinct on these questions, are you a morning person or a night owl?

DAN: I am generally a morning person. The challenge here at the Big West is we have Hawaii. So Hawaii could be three hours later game time wise. So it could be night owl at time. Is, but I'm definitely a morning person.

KARA: Oh, fair enough. Fair enough. Do you consider yourself to be an introvert or an extrovert?

DAN: It depends on the day. You know, sometimes I'd love to be an introvert, where I could just sit on the couch and watch a movie, but I'm definitely an extrovert in this position.

KARA: If you had to make an appearance on a game show, which one would you choose?

DAN: No doubt about it, the price is right. It's, it's one I grew up watching. I think everybody jokes it's when you were home sick as a kid. That's that's the game show you watch. That was the game show I grew up with. I'd love to be on that show.

KARA: There's something I do equate prices right, with chicken noodle soup, for some reason...

DAN: Absolutely, Kara. You hit that spot on.

KARA: What is your favorite thing to cook for dinner?

DAN: I love I love cooking. I think nowadays tacos. I love making different kinds of tacos.

KARA: And what are you currently reading or listening to? Anything we should add to our list?

DAN: I literally listen to bird fans forever. It's one my one of my favorite podcasts. It actually is broadcast via YouTube by former teammate of mine, John Pemberton and his crew. I really enjoy listening to that podcast. Reading wise, I try to try to read whatever I can, and a lot of it's online nowadays, just trying to keep up with what's going on in the college athletic space. Unfortunately, I'm reading a lot of legal briefs. But when I read, I love John Grisham. I love those type of, those type of books. When I have the opportunity to just read for pleasure.

KARA: Thank you for those recommendations. And I ask everybody that comes on this podcast, Avantis gondola or pub two cheese balls.

DAN: This is an easy one for me. Avantis godolas. I will take avanis. I grew up in Washington, Illinois, obviously, Peoria and Bloomington, both normal, both have Avani. So Avani is a favor of mine, and I could tell you when you're away, there's days that you crave Avantis bread. So Avani is for me.

KARA: I love to hear it. One last question for you, Dan, if you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

DAN: Kara, at this time, I would tell them to make as many connections as they possibly can and get as much experience as they can. Don't hesitate to apply for an opportunity or pursue an opportunity, particularly even if it's a volunteer opportunity. I got my start- I got noticed at the Missouri Valley tournament by volunteering at the Missouri Valley tournament. That got me the opportunity to become an intern in the Missouri Valley. So as I tell students often, it really is 10% of what you know, 90% of who you know. You really need to try to reach out, say hello to people. There's a number of students that have reached out to me, whether it's via LinkedIn, whether it's via email, and I generally try to connect with those students. I remember those days. I know it's a challenge to even send that note and making sure that it's right, but as you look at opportunities and the ideal opportunities you want to pursue, it's really going to be the people that you know they're going to help you get that opportunity. So, make connections now, don't hesitate to send that note. Apply for that position as I as I tell students, the worst they could say is no but one great thing for you, at least you've gotten your name into the opportunity that you want to pursue.

KARA: Well, thank you for that great advice, and thanks again for being here. That was Dan Butterly, Commissioner of the Big West. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni.