

SPRINTING TO GREATNESS

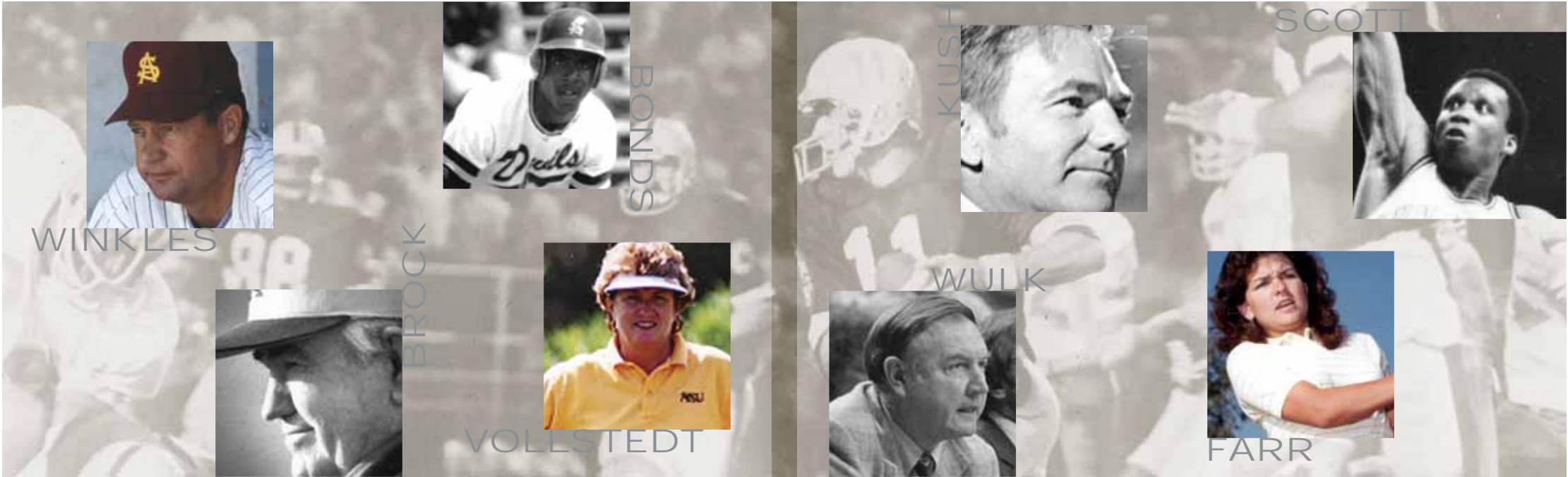
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ASU athletic victories have boosted university's development

By Bill Goodykoontz

Photo: Dan Vermillion

FRANK KUSH & LINDA VOLLSTEDT



Ask any rabid Arizona State University fan what the most important moment in the school's sports history is and you'll get a range of answers.

Bobby Winkles' first national baseball championship in 1965? The 1987 Rose Bowl win over Michigan? Phil Mickelson's three individual NCAA golf championships in 1989, 1990 and 1992?

Fine moments, all. But the most important was a more prosaic affair, nothing more than an announcement – albeit an

announcement that had lasting repercussions for all of ASU's sports programs.

On July 1, 1978, ASU (along with the University of Arizona) joined what was then known as the Pacific-8 Conference, creating the Pacific-10, or Pac-10. With that, ASU left the Western Athletic Conference behind, retained conference play with its fiercest rival and joined the ranks of the University of Southern California, UCLA, Oregon, Washington and more.

"That would probably take precedence over everything," Bob Eger, a longtime Arizona Republic reporter who covered ASU for years, said. Linda Vollstedt, who coached ASU women's golf from 1980 to 2001, winning six national championships, agreed.

"I don't think we really realized how big it could be until we were there," she said. "As it evolved, our Pac-10 conference gets stronger and stronger."

While every sport benefited from the switch, football was the catalyst. Frank Kush's Sun Devil teams had an amazing run through the '70s, including undefeated seasons in 1970 and 1975. Yet this was a team playing in West Coast time in a small conference, struggling for recognition outside the state.

Joining the Pac-10 provided it. Oddly enough, it was a move Kush resisted – at first. He feared the difficulty in recruiting against California schools, worrying that ASU wouldn't be able to compete. But his stance has shifted considerably.

"It has really developed to be one of the best things that happened to Arizona State," Kush said. "Not only the national recognition, but also the level of competition."

While admission to the Pac-10 was obviously important, this is not to say that ASU hasn't had plenty of highlights on the field, as well. It's won a total of 131 national championships in sports as diverse as mixed badminton to baseball to, in 2007, women's track and field.

Along the way it's produced plenty of top-caliber athletes: just the tip of

the list includes names such as Sal Bando, Bob Horner, Melissa Belote, Reggie Jackson, Danny White, Jake Plummer, Mickelson, Curly Culp, Barry Bonds, Heather Farr, Danielle Ammaccapane, Fat Lever and Byron Scott. The school has also enjoyed success with such notable coaches as Vollstedt, Winkles, Jim Brock, Ned Wulk and, of course, Kush.

But before an institution can have great sports teams, those teams need a place to play.



Three West campus renames: the School of Global Management & Leadership, the College of Teacher Education &

2004



College of Architecture and Environmental Design becomes the College of Design.

2004



The Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications becomes a freestanding school.

2005

ASU's Downtown Phoenix campus opens for fall classes.

2006

The College of Law is renamed the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at ASU.

2006

The School of Educational Innovation and Teacher Preparation opens at the Polytechnic campus.

2006

The journalism school launches the New Media Innovation Lab.

2006

The College of Education at the Tempe campus is renamed the Mary Lou Fulton College of Education.

2006

A new interdisciplinary Masters of Real Estate Development degree is established.

2006



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Sun Devil Stadium, built in 1958, started its life modestly, holding just 30,450 seats. Today, after several makeovers, it's able to hold 74,000 screaming ASU fans. Wells Fargo Arena, where the Sun Devil basketball teams play, opened in 1974, with a capacity of 14,000. Sun Angel Stadium, where the track-and-field team competes, opened in 1976, and is as fine as any in the country.

During ASU's half-century as a university, major college sports programs have come to be defined in large part by their football teams. Certainly ASU has been, to a great degree. In addition to Kush's success – a record of 176 wins, 54 losses and one tie – he was also involved in the school's biggest controversy. Former punter Kevin Rutledge filed a \$2.2

million lawsuit in 1979, alleging, among other things, that Kush punched him in the mouth after a poor kick.

Kush was fired, though he was later acquitted. In 2000, he was hired as a special assistant to the athletic director. But before that, in 1996, ASU announced that the field at Sun Devil Stadium would be named for him.

Right after the field-naming announcement, ASU beat No. 1-ranked Nebraska 19-0, kicking off an undefeated 1996 season that would lead the team to another trip to the Rose Bowl. Eger ranks that win as one of the school's biggest in any sport.

As the university has continued to grow, so has passion for its sports teams.

"I think for many (people) it's an identifier for them," said Christine Wilkinson, ASU's senior vice president and secretary, who also has served several stints as interim athletic director. "I watch what sports does in general for so many people who haven't ever gone to school here, and they begin to identify and affiliate with them, and it becomes their team."

It's the kind of thing that kept Vollstedt in Tempe for so long.

"I love ASU," she said. "I had a chance to leave and go someplace else. But sometimes you just have to go with where your heart is."

Bill Goodykoontz is a Chandler-based freelance writer.



Polytechnic East College becomes the School of Applied Arts & Sciences.

2007



Polytechnic College of Science & Technology becomes the College of Technology & Innovation.

2007



Walker Cronkite helps break ground for the School of Journalism's new complex in downtown Phoenix campus.

2007

The university establishes the School of Sustainability.

2007