

UWF, FSU partnership will aid Argos football

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(Photo: Tony Giberson/tgiberson@pnj.com)

In a partnership that fulfills needs of two universities, the University of West Florida football program will benefit with a training center that is a necessity for its future.

UWF was thankful for Florida State University to help make it happen.

A groundbreaking ceremony Thursday celebrated the \$6.8 million University Park Center that will house the FSU college of medicine Pensacola regional school campus on the second floor and UWF football on the first floor. When completed in early 2018, it will provide UWF athletics with a near 5,000 square foot weight room, a football training room, locker area and showers.

"We waited a long time for this building," said UWF president Judy Bense. "I want you to think about what used to be here (woods), think about UWF without football, think about how we started. This is really step two in the University Park vision that we have for campus.."

The two-story building will have a massive, glass-enclosed front side and will front one end zone of the Argos' sparkling AstroTurf field that Pen Air Federal Credit Union recently provided \$1 million for naming rights as Pen Air Field.

"It is a huge piece of the puzzle," said UWF football coach Pete Shinnick. "We've got guys who have caught the vision (of playing for UWF). Now we are actually going to have some steel and concrete to go along with that vision.

"We're going to be able to walk right from the locker room to the field. It's going to be beautiful."

FSU's partnership was an arrangement that new UWF president Martha Saunders helped forge. When learning that FSU was looking for a new building to lease in Pensacola for its expanding college of medicine, Saunders asked FSU if it would agree to join UWF in a project that would also benefit the Argos football team.

"If it wasn't for her idea, innovative thinking, if you will, we would not had (FSU) in this building. She played a key role in putting this together," Bense said. "It is fitting that this is my last building in which we will break ground and it will be the first building that will cut a ribbon under her presidency.

"It is just serendipity, Martha, and we all thank you."

FSU quickly agreed and the school's lease payment will help the construction costs. That help from FSU enabled the project to go forward immediately.

"This one is totally self-funded internally between the University of West Florida and Florida State University, so it's a real accomplishment of partnership and creativity," said Steve Cunningham, the UWF vice president for finance and administration.

The partnership was a difference-maker in the entire project.

"We have our own new college of health that is going like gangbusters and needs a home as well," Bense said. "And without the college of health, without the FSU college of medicine, we would not be building this building.

"Everyone should know that."

Bense, who earned two degrees at Florida State, was able to see through a facility that she knew had to occur to house UWF football, which is currently operating in trailers.

"It's emblematic of the way 21st century universities are evolving our institutions," Bense said. "It is a facility that is rooted in partnerships. I will tell you that universities compete with each other, but on the other hand universities are in the same kettle of hot water.



University of West Florida President Judy Bense announces the groundbreaking on the football-training center over looking Pen Air Field during a ceremony Thursday afternoon. The new building will house a new football-training center on the first floor and an FSU medical center branch on the second. (Photo: Tony Giberson/tgiberson@pnj.com)

"We used to never partner because that was our competition. I always thought that was wrong. FSU is a wonderful university. I am glad to have a good partner on our campus. It is wonderful."

In less than two years, FSU medical school students will be completing their final physician assistant requirements at UWF. It will expand FSU's reach with its college of medicine.

"Our medical students have benefited from the partnership we have with the Pensacola medical community, and many of them have returned to this community as practicing physicians," said FSU president John Thrasher, who was unable to attend the groundbreaking due to his changed schedule in dealing with Hurricane Matthew and its mass effects.

"Taking this step to work with our friends at UWF is a great opportunity not only to share resources, but to expand our efforts to identify students in Northwest Florida who identify with our mission – not only in medical school, but in our developing new PA program, as well."

Getting the facility built is something UWF wanted to complete or at least move through construction this season. The original quest was to have it ready to go in January, so UWF football players could move in before next season.

Bense remembered with regret how she had told Shinnick on the hopeful timetable during his job interview more than two years ago.

"I said, we're going to build these things for you," she said. "And then times changed, kinda got crazy, the legislature had tightened some areas we had counted on for funding and I had to say, 'Coach, we can't build the building right away.' And it wasn't a pretty conversation. But it had to happen.

"He didn't complain, he didn't belly-ache, he just kept going to work, building the team. We have a wonderful field (Pen Air Field) and that was half the package. Now we're going to have the other half of the package. They have been in those trailers for two years and I haven't had one word of complete."

The trailers will still be used for coaches offices until UWF can find resources to either expand the University Park Center or create new room elsewhere. But getting the players out of trailers was the first priority.

The ceremony Thursday follows UWF's upset win last Saturday night against nationally ranked Florida Tech.

"A great week for UWF football," Shinnick said. "For our players to have a place to go in between classes or before practice and really hang out, our weight room and locker room will be there. Everything will be housed together.

"It's no longer, hey we hope it works out, or it's been delayed, We have a concrete date. We have a building to show. When they interviewed me and asked what qualities do you think you have learned (from past start-up program at UNC-Pembroke) and it's patience.

"Nothing really plays out exactly the way you want it to. You just have to learn to deal with delays and certain aspects of it."

ABOUT UNIVERSITY PARK CENTER

COST: \$6.8 million

COMPLETION: Scheduled for spring 2018

SIZE: 32,700 square feet.

LOCATION: Adjacent to Pen Air Field on UWF campus. Located on plateau behind one end zone.

ARCHITECTS: Caldwell Associates

CONSTRUCTION: Childers' Construction, Tallahassee.

FIRST FLOOR: Approximate 5,000-square foot weight room for use by all UWF athletes in all sports. Football locker room, training room, shower facilities, equipment room and laundry facilities.

SECOND FLOOR: UWF college of health, FSU college of medicine. FSU students involved in the school's Pensacola regional campus are third and fourth-year medical students.