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# ATHLETICS


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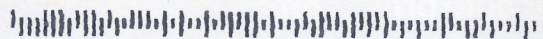
# NEW HEIGHTS

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING MICK & SUSIE MCMURRY  
**HIGH ALTITUDE**  
PERFORMANCE CENTER

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# Statement of Intent:

## The Walter Athletics Center at Northwestern University

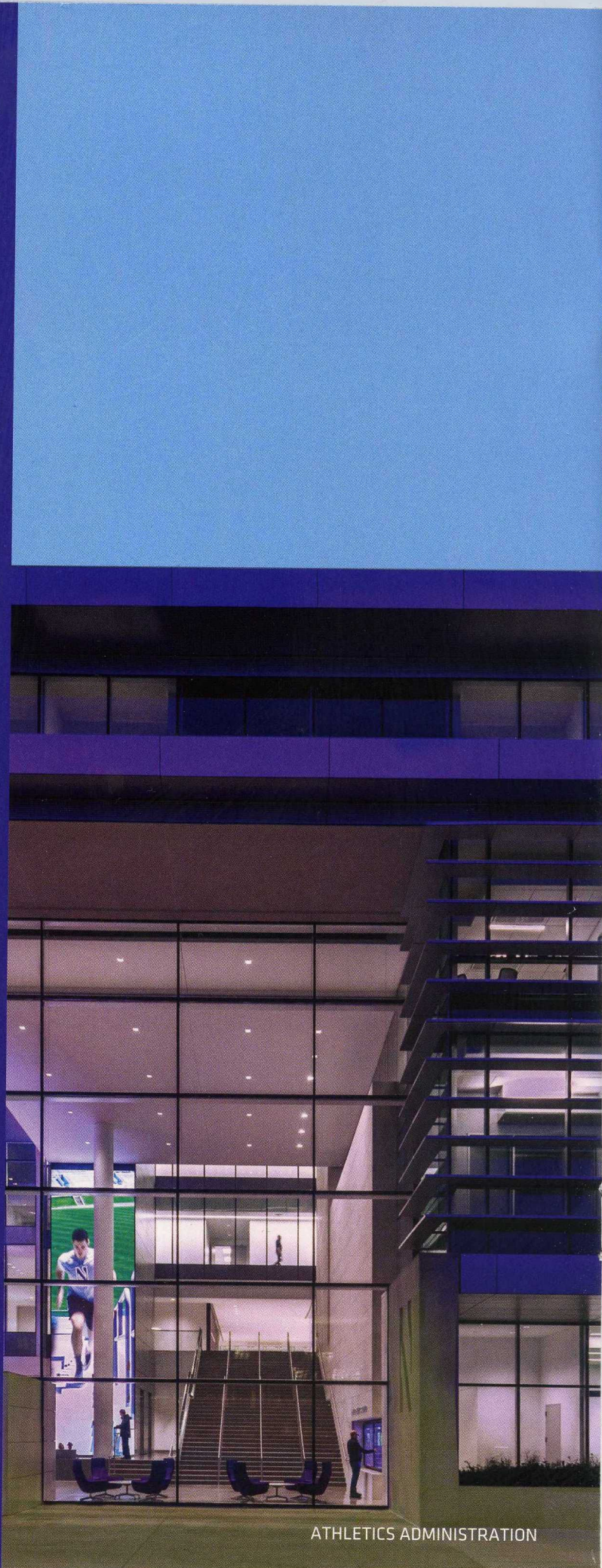
Written by  
**Jake May**

Rising out of the Evanston sand bordering Lake Michigan at the northernmost tip of the Northwestern University campus, the Walter Athletics Center, Ryan Fieldhouse and Wilson Field are the dazzling glass-and-steel centerpiece for the next generation of Wildcat athletics. Design began in 2013 for the 270 million-dollar facility, the new daily hub of the student-athlete experience for more than 500 young men and women, with construction beginning in 2015 and the facility dedication on August 1, 2018.

"Our goal was to build a transformational, world-class facility," said Deputy Director of Athletics (Capital Projects and Operations) Brian Baptiste. "I think we absolutely accomplished that goal."

In years prior, the nucleus of Northwestern athletics lived about a mile west of campus. Ryan Field, the home of Wildcats football and athletic training, sat at the center of a collection of buildings including Welsh-Ryan Arena (home court for men's and women's basketball, volleyball and wrestling), Anderson Hall (the hub of NU's athletics administration, academic advising, and more) and Trienens Hall (indoor fieldhouse and sports performance). With the 20-hour in-season practice limit, cleaning up the commute and cutting down on time wasted was a major priority for the new facility.

"I came from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and when I came down here in 2012, how far behind [Northwestern] was stood out to me," said women's soccer head coach Michael Moynihan,



ATHLETICS ADMINISTRATION



in reference to the facilities. “The staff was spread out, student-athletes had to go a long way to get to their academic advisors. Part of why I came was [Combe Family Vice President for Athletics and Recreation] Jim Phillips’ promise that changes were on the way.”

Though it’s easy to become enamored with the waterfront views of Chicago, the floor-to-ceiling windows and the state-of-the-art technology housed within the Walter Athletics Center, the building serves purposes far greater than simple aesthetics. Those changes alluded to by Moynihan begin with the location; the facility is the latest addition to Northwestern’s evolving Evanston campus, within walking distance of classrooms, laboratories, libraries and dormitories.

But how did designers and workers drop a 433,000-square-foot facility into an already crowded campus bordered by Lake Michigan? Access points were few, and a coastal wall needed to be built to protect against the soggy surroundings. Led by the Chicago-based Perkins + Will architecture firm, builders and the university took a methodical approach, obtaining 33 permits from local, state and national agencies while heavy winds and cold weather complicated much of the construction process. In the winter, large steel elements needed to be hoisted into midair simultaneously and fused together.

“The location makes it really special, but that was also one of the challenges,” said Baptiste. “We knew we only had one chance to get it right.”

Despite such difficulties, the building reached completion in under three years. Aside from the obvious developmental enhancements it provides for student-athletes, the facility also serves as one of the best recruiting tools in college athletics. The centerpiece of that effort is the lobby, an airy, naturally-lit space with a 40-foot tall video wall sitting behind the reception desk, touchscreens lining both walls and a wide staircase running up the middle of the room. Those interactive monitors feature each of Northwestern’s 19 varsity programs, with information highlighting famous alums, recent successes and more details on each program with just a tap.

“It’s a strong indicator of NU’s commitment to perform at the highest level,” said Moynihan of the facility’s recruiting advantages. “We want to provide an opportunity to excel in all areas; it’s a statement of intent there.”

Heading upstairs, you soon find yourself on the third floor and in the Querrey Simpson Wing.

## “The location makes it really special...we knew we only had one chance to get it right.”

Phillips, Baptiste and others spent much of the buildup to construction traveling around the country touring other college and professional athletics facilities to get a sense for the “best practices” they hoped to replicate

at Northwestern. Chief among them was the idea that the most important elements of the building needed to be arranged around the food. The academic services team relocated to Walter along with the professional development offices, quickly settling into their new homes adjacent to the heart of the Walter Athletics Center: Nona Jo’s Dining Center.

“Dr. Phillips had our best interests in mind when modeling this facility, and we want to have the most heavily trafficked places on the same floor,” said senior Jared Thomas, an offensive lineman on the football team. He noticed a definite uptick in traffic around those offices upon moving into Walter.

“You can’t eat without passing academic services,” Thomas said.

The dining area includes a nutrition center for post-practice and on-the-go fuel as well as a team of nutritionists who design meal plans specifically for student-athletes. Perhaps more significantly, the third floor presents an opportunity for the entire Northwestern athletics community to come together each day and interact with a new level of familiarity. Baptiste, Moynihan and Thomas all touched on the newfound sense of community among the teams born out of that space.

“[Student-athletes] are in there enjoying the space and enjoying each other,” said Moynihan.

“I didn’t think we realized how impactful that would be until we got into the building,” added Baptiste.

The dining center and nutrition bar keep the student-athletes full and focused, but injuries inevitably befall even the most well-prepared player. Towards that end, the Walter Center features several significant technological upgrades from the old setup. There are four hydrotherapy pools – a personal favorite of Thomas – to aid with injury recovery as well as postgame and post-practice aches and pains. The school’s athletic trainers now reside in their own offices and can provide private consultations at any time. Rehab areas, cardio-specific rehab areas, a physician’s clinic, multiple exam rooms and an X-ray room all occupy a state-of-the-art health and wellness hub, reinforcing the commitment to phenology that underlines the entire project while prioritizing for the physical well-being of each student-athlete.

"It enhances the recovery as an athlete," said Thomas. "You're not just striving for a championship, you make it a standard. It marries the surroundings with the rhetoric."

The idea of increasing convenience for student-athletes and maximizing their minutes was obviously one of the driving factors behind moving to an on-campus location, but designers did not stop there. For example, the enormous football team meeting room features a soundproof barrier that lowers to divide the room in half so offense and defense can convene separately without changing location. The auditorium is ringed by individual position group meeting rooms, player equipment cubbies, the locker room and coaches' offices.

"Everything is where it is for a reason," said Thomas. "It's the feeling that I don't have to leave [the facility] to feel like I'm prepared for the next day's work."

Though the football team rightfully loves their new digs, the Walter Athletics Center features significant upgrades for every member of the Wildcats family. The Olympic teams received their own sports performance center that allows those programs space to do more than just lift weights. As Moynihan touched on, his team can warm up for practices and games in that area before simply walking outside to their home turf at Martin Stadium. Teams such as swimming and diving no longer compete with the NU community for locker room space in Henry Crown Sports Pavilion. The seven-time NCAA champion women's lacrosse team will play some early-season home games this year inside the enormous Ryan Fieldhouse.

"We had nowhere to feed them before; we used to set up card tables in the Patten Gym lobby," said Moynihan when asked about upgrades to his operation born out of the Walter Athletics Center. "We now have a full indoor field in the offseason. We never had a lounge for coaches where student-athletes could come in and meet with us and get that privacy."

The larger Northwestern community began reaping some of the benefits of the Walter Athletics Center when the School of Communication christened the facility with their annual gala, marking the first event hosted in the building. New student convocation took place in Ryan

Fieldhouse this past fall, and opportunities exist for other campus-wide events such as the annual student-led Dance Marathon fundraiser. The Walter Athletics Center features three basketball/indoor soccer courts, an elevated track and cardio equipment for public use, and will continue to play host to intramural and club sports during all academic quarters.

"The integration with the rest of campus is great; being over on Ryan Field you feel isolated," said Baptiste. "In a couple months when the weather turns and spring is upon us, I think there's a different vibe and energy on campus."

For Thomas, the university's teams must now take the reins and compete at a level that reflects their surroundings.

"Now that [Walter] is here, that motivates us more," he said. "We see tangible change, we now have this, so how can we be a program that everyone wants to be a part of? It's our job to make sure we work hard not only to get this facility, but maintain it and upkeep it."

For Moynihan, his team is coming off its fourth NCAA Tournament appearance in a row and he aims to continue trending in that direction. The Walter Athletics Center helps attract higher-caliber student-athletes who can sustain that success as well as give them the tools needed to chase their professional dreams.

"I don't think there's many places that would venture to undertake this. Most people would have been scared off by the hurdles," said Moynihan. "We have big dreams and big beliefs and if you work hard enough you can achieve them."

For Baptiste, a job well done does not mean stepping away from the project because the architects and builders vacated the premises. His focus now shifts to maximizing the opportunities created by Walter Athletics Center for the Northwestern community.

**"We're just scratching the surface of how this will impact the development of the individuals on our campus."**

"We're just scratching the surface of how this will impact the development of the individuals on our campus," said Baptiste. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and a once-in-a-lifetime facility." ■



Photo by Connor Steinkamp

