

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Bryan Blair:

How do we show tangible progress and alignment towards being the best version of Syracuse Athletics? Because the best version of ourself will and always will be good enough to manage this national landscape, be national championship caliber program in so many different ways, and be one of the top brands in the call of college athletics. This is Syracuse.

And to a certain degree, I kind of feel like we need to get our swagger back. This Block S means something across this country. We are a big deal. We've got to embrace being a big deal and make sure we perform like we are the big deal that we are and how we manage and support and enhance our campus and community along the way to something special.

John Boccacino:

We have a treat for folks at Syracuse University here today on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. Our guest is Bryan Blair, Syracuse University's director of athletics, and one of college athletics most innovative leaders. Blair was hired as the school's 12th athletics director in March, and he officially took over the reins of the Orange on July 1st. He has been on the go ever since, and who better to know than a former Division I student athlete as Blair himself?

He understands exactly what it takes to position our student athletes, coaches, and support staff for success on the playing fields, in the classroom, and in the community. He possesses a strong background in student athlete development and revenue generation and comes to Syracuse with a reputation as a builder of championship programs, a generator of innovative revenue strategies, and a true believer in the transformative power of higher education.

With that humble introduction underway, Bryan, thanks for making the time to join us today.

Bryan Blair:

No, thanks for having me. I know you led off, you said this will be a treat and I think everybody's going to be royally let down by this conversation, but nonetheless, I appreciate you having me on.

John Boccacino:

We try to raise the bar and set high standards for the guests when they come on here, but your story is so impressive and we're such a proud institution when it comes to our athletics department and the role that it plays. And we'll get into the specialty uniqueness of Syracuse Athletics. I want you to give our listeners, start baseline, your first few months on the job, what have you been focused on and how has that played out so far?

Bryan Blair:

Yeah, I mean, I think you have to start with people and relationships. I think that's the most important thing. I view it in this order of listen, learn, lead. And I view myself very much still in that listening and learning phase where I need to use two ears versus the one mouth and do a lot more listening and understanding what makes this place special. I think you go through a process and certainly people ask you, "Hey, what's your vision? What are you trying to do here? How can you help us get to where we want to get to?" And that's important, but you really quickly understand you don't know as much about this place as you think you do.

And I think to walk in and just start making wholesale changes versus asking a lot more questions, I think it'd be a really big mistake. And so a lot of listening, a lot of getting to know the people, a lot of understanding what people do really well, where they need to be positioned on the bus, maybe who needs to get off the bus, who needs to be added to the bus, all those kind of conversations. But almost everything we've tried to do early on is focus on the people and the relationships and then we'll get to the initiatives and the actions thereafter.

John Boccacino:

How do you go about, you mentioned listen, learn, lead and you're trying to get to know the community members here on your staff. What are some ways you've gone out and gotten to know the different coaches, the support staff, and then the student athletes?

Bryan Blair:

Yeah, so we did this thing when I first got hired. I had them send a survey out to the entire department and it was half, "Hey, get to know you. Tell me about your family. Tell me your favorite movie or your favorite restaurant in town," all those kind of things. And then it was half more or less a SWOT analysis, "Hey, tell me what strengths this place has. Tell me what do you think are the biggest opportunities for us to grow? What are the things that if you were a new AD, you wouldn't change right away? Who's the person that best represents what it's like to be Orange in this department?" Those type of questions.

And so to get 150, 175 responses off of that and then synthesize all that information gives you a head start. And then I did one-on-one meetings with all our unit leaders, one-on-one meetings with our head coaches, and I'm still working through one-on-ones with the department. And then we had a couple all-staffs in between. So you start there internally and then I've been getting out in the community. And whether it be corporate partners, whether it be alumni and donors, or just community leaders that want to make this place better to live, work, and play. So again, a lot of sit downs, a lot of conversations, but internalizing and listening a lot.

John Boccacino:

Can you share with us some of those takeaways that you received in those conversations about, from their perspective, their stakeholder view, why this place is so special?

Bryan Blair:

Yeah. I mean, I think the encouraging thing is some of it mirrored what I thought walking in, but a lot of it exceeded all my expectations. There is a shared alignment and understanding of what Syracuse Athletics looks like at its best and how it benefits this broader community and this campus. I don't have to go around to our chancellor or our provost or our deans or to Visit Syracuse or our county commissioner and say, "Hey, this is why we matter." No, no, no, Bryan, we got it. And frankly, we know it better than you do.

And you're right. I mean, I've not been in the Dome for a massive basketball win where the students rush the court or a 10 win season. A lot of our stakeholders have. And so they understand what it looks and feels like, and that's been impressed upon me. I think where we've got to get to, though, does everybody understand what it takes to get back there? You can't steer a boat by the wake. You can't look backwards and get to where you're trying to get to going forwards.

And so we've had some incredible years, some incredible athletes, some incredible coaches throughout our history. I would argue as many or more than anybody in the entire nation. I think the best athlete of all time played football and lacrosse here, Jim Brown, and many people would not dispute that. I think ESPN just recently did a poll, an article, and they said that. And so we've had some of the best, but what it's

going to take for us to be successful in this modern athletics landscape is going to be different than what allowed us to get to where we were historically.

John Boccacino:

I feel like I want to start our conversation pulling back just a little bit too, because you understand the student athlete perspective. I think that's really important to bring to this conversation. Having been at Wofford as a nose tackle, you worked your way from a walk on to being a starter your senior year. How does that help you in your job, having that previous experience, especially playing at the Division I level?

Bryan Blair:

Yeah, it probably tells you a little bit like I don't take no for an answer very easily. I am persistent, if nothing else. There's always a way to yes. And the question is, are you willing to do what it takes to get to that yes?

And so for me, played high school. I did four sports in high school, was All State in two of them, had a blessed career, but measurables, right? I don't stack up to most Division I talented student athletes. And had a place in Wofford that I had a full academic ride, so the money wasn't the issue. It was just, can I get a roster spot to prove myself? And had a coach take a chance on me. And then that experience taught me more about myself than just about anything else during my life. The trials, the tribulations, I was actually named starter the start of my junior year.

I lost my starting role just because I didn't perform. They had switched me in positions. I dropped some weight to try to shift out to the edge and it looked good in spring ball. It did not look good in the fall. And so I kicked back inside, and then to go through that up and down to then battle back to get back to being a starter, being a team captain, and those type of things, I'm really proud of that journey. And I think so much of that is emblematic of where we're at today where you've got to find a way to yes, you've got to find a way to push through adversity, rally your teammates to try to do something nobody else thinks is possible. And that very much is our plight today.

John Boccacino:

I think the sports information director at Wofford was a visionary. He recognized your future in this industry. Your official bio from the Wofford Athletics, you didn't think I might go back with that level of research, but it says you have excellent leadership abilities, and I think that really is a perfect segue into, again, your role here at Syracuse. When did you realize you wanted a career in college athletics?

Bryan Blair:

Shout out to my Wofford's SID, Mark Cohen. Visionary is the truth. Maybe a slight liar in that context, but I appreciate it nonetheless. No, I think I was on this journey. I went to Wofford thinking maybe I want to be a veterinarian. Most people don't know that. I loved animals. I still do love animals. I had dogs, everything.

And got to Wofford, took my first biology class, and quickly hit a U-turn and said, "Hey, that's not working out." So you can love animals and not be good at biology. Those two things can be true at the same time. And so went from there, knew I liked reading and writing. I was fairly good at processing information really quickly and writing and history was something I always loved. And so became a history major with an eye towards law school. And law school to me was kind of a stall tactic to figure out what else I wanted to do.

And I knew worst case scenario, I'm always thinking about scenarios, worst case scenario, you go to law school, you become a lawyer, you make good money, you're set. Best case scenario, you find a way along

that journey to combine that law degree with what you really want to do, passionate, and figure out what's next. And fortunately for me, I spent a lot of time and figure out what's next. And fortunately for me, I spent a lot of time looking up, okay, what lawyers are working in the sports space, in the business space that I can mirror? And I noticed, I think it was four or five of the major pro sports commissioners all had law degrees. We saw a lot of front office execs with law degrees. You saw increasingly more ADs with law degrees. And so light bulb goes off. I can combine those two spaces in a really unique way and make myself stand out amongst the crowd. A lot of people have MBAs or masters in sports management, and those are great degrees. I would argue then, and I would argue increasingly more now, having a law degree in this space is really advantageous.

John Boccacino:

Can you explain a little bit more on that thought of how a law degree benefits modern day college athletics landscape?

Bryan Blair:

Yeah. I mean, I think at a high level, contracts, negotiations, legislation, governance, all those things matter more than they ever did before. Not a day goes by that I'm not thinking about or talking about some level of injunction or NCAA lawsuit or those type of things. I mean, I spent a lot of time... Gabe Nugent has been a great teammate. We spent a lot of time together talking about some of the issues facing college athletics. And so that piece of it, yes.

I would argue though more deeply, law school does this great job of enhancing how you think and your analytical skills. And frankly, I call it your ability to see in the future because what you notice from law school, you come back that first Thanksgiving after your 1L semester, you've learned how to argue every side of every case in your head because that's how you're taught in law school is to think through all sides, what is the opposing argument going to be? So what you notice is you've thought through every scenario that might arise. And so when it does arise, you're no longer surprised and you've already thought through how you react to it. And so that ability to think through what may happen and what the outcomes could be as you make decisions, but also predict how you plan to react and how you want to plan going forward, I think is really, really useful.

John Boccacino:

How would you define your ability as a leader? What really makes you stand out and be able to coax the most out of the people that you're supervising?

Bryan Blair:

I think I've been blessed to be around some amazing people throughout my career and seeing how they led groups and gotten the most out of people. I think that, if there is a talent, it's being blessed to be around those other individuals. And so, to me, I want to be a really good teammate. I want to certainly lay out a vision and be aggressive with the pace that we run at. I want to model that pace and model that ambition, but I want to help people get to where they couldn't otherwise get by themselves. And oftentimes that means you see something in them that they don't even see in themselves and you help them get it out of it. But if you can get everybody individually to be the best version of themselves pulling in the same direction towards one common goal, that's how an organization is successful.

And so my job, whether it be Gerry McNamara or whether it be the person that helps clean up after the home game at the dome, how can I help them be the best version of themselves on this journey so we collectively can go where we couldn't otherwise go? And so I think I have an ability to maybe see some things before they happen from that front and really maybe articulate a vision that people want to be excited about getting a part of, but ultimately, it boils down to how can you and all your teammates be the best version of yourself? And whether I'm a good leader or not, I think that that ability to work with talented teams and work together is what I pride myself on.

John Boccacino:

I know the answer a lot of fans expect is great winning seasons, bowl games for football, March Madness deep runs for men's and women's basketball, men's and women's soccer making a big postseason run. But I want to scale it back to a simpler term. What will define success for Orange Athletics this upcoming year?

Bryan Blair:

It's funny when we have these conversations, people are like, "You just need to win." It's like, "Oh, really? I had no idea."

John Boccacino:

Tell me more about this hidden gem of winning.

Bryan Blair:

What is this winning thing you speak of? We're keeping score, what are we doing? So it's always funny because nobody puts more pressure on themselves than me, not even close. I beat myself up constantly about do's, don'ts, where are you doing? How are you working? Are you doing fast enough? All these things. But I think success to me is just progress. How do we show tangible progress and alignment towards being the best version of Syracuse Athletics? Because the best version of ourself will and always will be good enough to manage this national landscape, be national championship caliber program in so many different ways and be one of the top brands in the call of college athletics.

This is not a rags to riches story here. This is not the little engine that could trying to topple the big bag. No, this is Syracuse. And to a certain degree, I feel like we need to get our swagger back. This block S means something across this country. We are a big deal. We've got to embrace being a big deal and make sure we perform like we are the big deal that we are and how we manage and support and enhance our campus and a community along the way to something special.

And so I think, to me, that tangible progress looks like certainly improvements on the field and on the court, but laying the brakes and the foundation to be the best version of ourself relatively quickly because this college athletics landscape is changing rapidly. I think we need to be the best version of ourself in the next three years. I think that puts a lot of pressure on a lot of us to move quickly. And so what does that look like to lay the foundation? What does the structure around that from a campus organizational piece look like to act that quickly?

Those are big questions facing all of us because we cannot afford to try to grow organically in this moment. The time is too compressed for us right now. And so what does a non-organic growth pattern look like over these next three years to allow us to peak at the right time? I think that's the question facing myself, facing our chancellor, facing our board of trustees. But if we do it the way I know that we can do it, I think we're going to be really proud of the result at the end of the day.

John Boccacino:

Then give us a little more insight, the pillars that you're building the vision upon for getting this program to where it needs to be.

Bryan Blair:

Yeah. I mean, I boil it down into those four buckets. I think, one, from a football and men's basketball particularly, those sports need to be consistently relevant on a national stage. And I would argue, and I don't even argue, I think objectively anybody could say we've not consistently done that. Men's basketball were a basketball blue blood that hadn't been to the NCAA tournament in five years. I mean, that's our shared reality right now. That's not a finger point exercise. That's the reality of here's where we're starting from. We all know where we want to get to. Let's get to work and get back there. We're a football program that just two years ago experienced a 10 win top 20 season. And I can only imagine what this place looked and felt like, the energy, the excitement.

John Boccacino:

It was insane, Bryan. Every home game you're just like, something special is happening and the Fran Brown, and that's where there's so much hope for... And I didn't mean to interrupt you with the comment, but that's really the perspective. It was the loud house. I mean, it was rocking.

Bryan Blair:

Right? You experienced that two years ago. You want that back. You know what that feels like. And so I think that reality is something I'm really looking forward to getting back to and figuring out, okay, what is the pathway to get back to that? But football and basketball being nationally relevant not only enhances our brand. It enhances the student experience here, but it also allows us to do some things from a revenue generation standpoint in an environment that we couldn't otherwise do without those two sports. I mean, from a TV, from an ACC revenue standpoint, those two sports matter to an outsized degree. And that's not an opinion, that's a fact. And then to match the efforts that Felicia's doing in the basketball court, our two lacrosse programs both being top 15. You talk about Ian on soccer. You talk about Nikki. You could go down the list of Lynn and Phil. I mean, we've got so many programs that perform at a high level, but those two in particular have to be consistent. They have to be consistently nationally relevant. So you start there.

I think second, modernizing the enterprise. And in short form, we got to spend more than ever and make more than ever, but we got to spend it more efficiently than ever before. And so what does that look like? I think our commercial efforts and our organizational structure need to be enhanced to look and feel a little bit more like a pro sports organization. And we can't shy away from that. I'm not one that says college athletics is a business. I do think I have a business that operates within our athletic program and we need to treat it as such. That commercial organization, that commercial aggressiveness needs to be had and we all need to understand there's a fundamental shift happening that we have to be a part of. And so you start there on that side.

And then on the flip side, when you have those dollars, how do you make sure you get the most bang for your buck possible, both from facilities, both from staffing, but then also as our student athletes, as we talk about player compensation, that's a real topic right now. How do we almost "moneyball it" to a certain degree while bringing in and spending more than ever before? I think the organizations that do it at the highest levels not only spend money on compensation, whether you're talking about the Yankees or the Dodgers, those others that are at the top end of those metrics, they also do a really good job scrubbing those investments and understanding objectively what's the ROI, what leads our decision making, how can we make wiser, better decisions going forward? So we've got to modernize our commercial efforts and how we spend is that second prong.

I think third is weaponizing the dome. I use that term in my opening press conferences and very intentional about what that looks like. This is a tool to do all the things that we want to do. The dome, I think, is one of the biggest tools. You talk about revenue generation. You talk about home field advantage. You talk about generating a unique student experience and giving an incredible fan experience overall and being that really large community engagement, concert venue, large community engagement, concert venue. I mean, it's the biggest and best around. It is the most unique arena, stadium, whatever you call it, in all of college athletics. On the flip side, it's the largest entertainment venue for a multiple hour radius, and certainly with the indoor capacity. So you look at the Garden Downstate, and then Upstate here, you're talking about the Dome.

And so the Garden, when you say it, it's synonymous with Globetrotters and concerts and acts and the Knicks and the ... Well, we want the same thing to be said of the Dome. And so how do we weaponize that to the point of being this entertainment hub that brings the community on our campus to experience all that Syracuse has to offer? And so all those factors lead into weaponizing the Dome, and that's a multi-year process. We're going to have to do some more renovations. We're going to have to think outside the box from a technology, a lighting ... All the other abilities that allow us to put on a best-in-class show have to happen there.

And then lastly, I think we've got this academic advantage that other schools can't replicate. When you talk about some of our schools, I mean, we're sitting here talking about Creator Economy and Newhouse, what does it look like to lean into that as we think about storytelling and content creation for our athletic programs? This is the best Communications school in the entire country, so how do we make sure our athletic program off the heels of that talent, those faculty, that dean, but also our students, do the best job possible of being a content engine, and really a media company disguising as an athletic department? That's where our ambitions have to lead us. You could say the same thing about Whitman and what we do there, or Maxwell or Visual Performing Arts, or certainly Falk, where we've got students just craving hands-on learning opportunities.

And so, we can create this win-win where students on our campus get an unparalleled student experience where they're helping solve real-world challenges within a Division 1 Power Four athletic program. On the flip side, that our Power Four athletic program can benefit from these hundreds of students that want the hands-on experience, but bring a unique perspective and insight and ability for us to scale our operations much more quickly. So how do we harness that academic advantage to take this department where it can't go? I think you combine those four things, that positions us as a top 10 brand in college athletics.

I would argue your top 10 athletic department, full stop, in college athletics, because if your football and basketball programs are rolling, you've already got both your lacrosse programs and a number of other programs rolling ... You're functional where you generate more revenue and spending it smarter than ever. You've got one of the most unique home venues in all of college athletics. I would argue eighth runner of the world in many ways. And then you've got some academic programs that others can't replicate overnight that give us a competitive advantage that can be lasting and enduring, those four things set us up for an immense amount of success. It's a lot easier to articulate that than it is to pull it off-

John Boccacino:

Sure.

Bryan Blair:

... because there's a lot of people and processes and time that it takes to do those things, but I'm confident in our team to pull that off.

John Boccacino:

I really appreciate, Bryan, the fact that you emphasize the academic achievement, and I really appreciate that there's an emphasis not just on winning in the field of play, but in the classroom academic side of it too. So let's say the student-athletes that are here now, this is your first year, when they move on from this place, when they graduate, when they earn their degree, what do you want them to think back and say about what it was like to be here at Syracuse?

Bryan Blair:

Yeah, it was the best four or five years of my life in all way and shape and form of that. I think sometimes the challenge I see in this job today is you spend so much time talking about the business and the numbers and the budget, the profit loss statements and the like, and I get all that. That is really important. I also understand college athletics forever changed my life. It taught me I've got more in the tank than I thought. It showed me how to push myself further than I thought was possible. It put me around a diverse group of teammates from all over the country, all coming together around a common goal and collectively being an underdog team, but finding a way to punch above our weight. I mean, college athletics changed my life. It's a big reason why I got to law school and went onto that journey.

And so, how do we have that same life-altering experience for our student-athletes? That's what we need to be here for. And here at Syracuse, our student-athletes go to class. It's not just, "Oh, I log into class." They actually physically sit in a classroom next to the future leaders of this country and have an amazing experience. I'm jealous of the experience our student-athletes have. When I look around some of these colleges, we talk about these classes, I mean, I wish there was a creator economy that I could go back to, just because it stretches the bounds of what's possible. You're not sitting there in that biology class like I talked about trying to be a pre-vet. You're learning things that you're just fascinated by and that really stoke your creativity and your curiosity.

And so to have all that here, it feels amazingly special. I, frankly, push back on the notion, and I do in conversations with individuals when they say, "Well, I hate today's college athletics. These young people don't care about the school. They're only here for a year or two." Okay, well fix it. I'm not saying Congress fix it. I'm not saying NCAA fix it. I'm saying we fix it. Syracuse should be a destination. I push back on this notion that you only come here as a jumping off point or a career stop or a stop along your student-athlete journey. We perform and compete at the highest levels of college athletics. We can win national championships here. We can hold up a number one and stand behind it here. You can be a student-athlete and play in front of 35,000 in a basketball arena and be celebrated and carried off the court.

Why would you leave that to go to somewhere else in the country? You can compete along with Fran Brown and that team for a CFP spot and play for a national championship. Why would you leave that? Make it an environment where people want to stay. And so that's not going to happen overnight, but that's got to be our guiding vision.

John Boccacino:

I know you talked about weaponizing the Dome, and there's a three-year plan that you outlined for fan engagement and, really, tailgating. Explain what the new features fans might see when they come out to campus, to the Dome or to the soccer complex, to the women's building for volleyball. What's going to be new this year?

Bryan Blair:

Yeah, I mean, I think the thought behind that three-year plan is there's a lot of work that needs to be behind the scenes. We're bringing on some new staff that are going to help us along that journey that I'm really excited about unveiling over the next month. And then there's some technology enhancement, some purchases we need to make to allow us to do what we need to do. And then there's the permitting and the lawyers and the insurance, and all those things that I'm finding more about as we try to do some of these new, fun, exciting ideas at Syracuse.

But in short form, we've focused on a couple of things. One, the Quad. And you say, "Well, why the Quad?" Our tailgating atmosphere is a little choppy. We've got all these different lots and parts of campus. You can look at that as, "Oh my gosh, we don't have fairgrounds. We can't be successful." Or on the flip side, look at it as almost unique neighborhoods, that each has their own interpersonal identity. I mean, I think to a certain degree that organically happens here, based on what I'm told, but we want to start with the Quad because that can be the most compressed energy as close to the Dome as you can possibly get it. So you've got the Quad Walk, which Coach Brown brought with him, and then how do we enhance the tents and the like? So you have brand new live music on a stage. We're going to have a band every game playing. You're going to have new games, like a mechanical bull or rock climbing wall, some of those kind of things for the adult that wants to get up there, but certainly for the kids.

I've got a five and eight-year-old, and them standing around while you drink a beer is not successful. You need something for them to do. So how do we weave those things in along with long games and everything else? And then food trucks, but also a massive LED screen. When I wake up at 9:00 on a Saturday, if I ever had a free Saturday, I would want to watch College GameDay. I want to be locked in and hearing what's happening around the country while I'm hanging out with my buddies and socializing, getting ready to walk into the Dome and watch us play. I don't want you to have to feel like you leave that at home. How do we bring that to the Quad?

So you start there, and then on the end game, really focusing on, okay, what does that team interest look like? How do we set this thing off where you want to be in your seat by the time the team comes off, and what can we do that's never been done before in the Dome? So I'm excited about some of the steps we took there. I think we've got some other enhancements that you're going to see, including our T-shirt Gatling gun, which I am just ecstatic about, and I can't wait for people to see this thing because it is a monster. And so really excited about that. And then leaning into, one, our band. It's their 125th anniversary. They got brand new uniforms this year. Real proud of those individuals. They're students. I think sometimes we forget that. Those students are a critical part of our game day experience, the pageantry of college athletics.

Then you lean into the third quarter where it's all students, all the time. We need our students to come back after halftime. So we got \$2 hot dogs, \$2 sodas and waters and popcorn. To try to discount that, we're going to let them really design the whole show during the third quarter. We're going to do some things in terms of students versus faculty and competitions. We've got a messy surprise that we're going to roll out midway through the third quarter that took a lot of approvals from a lot of people to get done. But really just going to have a lot of fun in the third quarter, make you want to get back after halftime and be in your seat to check all that out while the team returns to the field.

And then fourth quarter, we're trying to take out all the ads, all the sponsorships, all the recognitions, just make it about the team and finishing strong in the fourth quarter. And so when that game's on the line, what are we doing from a DJ, music, light, fan interaction to get the crowd on their feet into the game to celebrate what we're doing? Including showing more decibel readings. Live decibel readings, not the phony meter. We want people to know, "Okay, here's your starting point." As I mentioned, 130.5 would be a new record for the Guinness Book of World Records. We want to show that live reading and then we're going to designate a game where we go out and we break that record.

Bryan Blair:

We want to show that live reading and then we're going to designate a game where we go out and we break that record and own it here in Syracuse. And so a lot of moving pieces, but this is literally just the tip of the iceberg. We're going to stretch the bounds of possible here in the Dome.

John Boccacino:

I love that. I fully believe it. The Dome will be rocking once again. Of course, the football home-opener is this Saturday against New Hampshire kicking off at noon. Bryan, I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about NIL is everywhere. You alluded to this. We've been talking about the changing landscape of college athletics. There's an excitement with One Orange Alliance. Tell us a little bit more about your vision and how people can get involved.

Bryan Blair:

This thing changes by the day. My phone's buzzing in my pocket. I'm sure there's probably been a tweet that just rocked my world. But the rapidly changing landscape, you need vehicles that allow you to be nimble. And what I noticed when I got here talking to Coach Brown and others, we had SU Football NIL and they were critical to helping us maintain and have a certain level of success and keep some of our star players.

Our other sports had kind of a fragmented effort. You had a lot of starts and stops and some other things that were going on. And so one, to have a collective effort overall, one stop shop for every sport.

But two, I think what we've seen around the landscape, you no longer have collectives. These have to be true third party deals that are partnered with actual businesses. And so you shift from "collective of donors" to now a vehicle where businesses can join and sign up and say, "Hey, I want to support this and I want to be able to use this student athlete at my restaurant or at my social media, whatever, to help tell our story and really amplify what we're trying to do." And so I saw Kiyan Anthony was at Meier's Creek this past weekend and had a line of people lined up to want to see him sign autographs and certainly on social media interacting. That drums up business for Meier's Creek.

I learned a stat the other week when Coach Brown had that 10 win season, there was a \$50 million jump in economic impact and that was a conservative read. 1 in 10 employees in Onondaga County works in the hospitality industry. Our department has an outsized impact on this community, probably more than most people realize. And when this thing has success, you really can't put a price tag on what that success means for the common fan who's working in the hospitality industry, whether it be a hotel or restaurant or whatever, server, you're making their life better in that process. And then all of us collectively, I would imagine that the winters aren't as cold anymore, the popcorn's a little fresher, the sun's shining a little brighter.

John Boccacino:

Those Dome Dogs taste even better-

Bryan Blair:

... There you go. It's a better tasting Dome Dog when this team's performing at a high level. But to get back there, we've got to do some things to make it possible. And One Orange Alliance and Colby Clark, I mean, I can't thank them enough for stepping up to the plate and saying, "Hey, we want to help lead this initiative and we'll partner with you to get this thing going."

John Boccacino:

We will make sure to link out to One Orange Alliance on the podcast notes when that episode gets published. Bryan, the last question I got for you, I have more, but I know we have to be aware of the time here. We could keep going for sure. But I mentioned the football home-opener taking place on Saturday. Fully healthy, fully assembled Fran Brown's team going into its third year here. What is the excitement level around this program and why should people come out in droves to cheer on football this year?

Bryan Blair:

Yeah, I think you got a once in a generation head coach that's assembled a really talented roster. And not only a really talented roster, but some really ... Just the finest young men I think you could want to be around. I went to Coach Brown's house, he had cookout for the team and he actually had me on the grill serving up hot dogs and hamburgers.

John Boccacino:

What kind of grill master are you?

Bryan Blair:

So I love grill and I love smoking meat even more so. I did not realize how long I would be there and how many hamburgers and hot dogs a team plows through. I should have known, but I did think-

John Boccacino:

You were a football guy.

Bryan Blair:

Yeah. But three hours later on the grill, I'm still there flipping burgers like, "Man, I'm tired. I'm sweating. You guys eating too much. We need to hire somebody for this." So I learned a lesson. I'll do an appearance at first and then I'll fade away and let somebody else take it over. But what I noticed too is I had my son there with me, he's five years old and I never doubted he'd run around and play basketball with the guys or hanging out by the pool. And I never worried about who he was around. He's with really good role models that he sees as 105 big brothers walking around.

And so more than anything, great football players, I mean we're massive along in so many positions, but really good human beings. And I think that's the piece that most people don't understand about Fran Brown. It's not only is he a great recruiter, those type of things, he gives sound bites, but the type of individual and how he positively reinforces lessons and life lessons to these young men. And so many of our coaches do it, but I highlight him on what we're talking about for football. It's just really encouraging. It makes you want to work harder and make sure he's got the support he needs.

John Boccacino:

I know I'm ready to run through a brick wall after hearing our conversation here, getting stoked up for Syracuse Athletics. He is Bryan Blair. He has been the guest here on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. Bryan, all of Orange Nation is behind you. We appreciate your vision, your initiatives, and there will be people cheering on this team from all across the country. Keep up the great work and best of luck this year.

Bryan Blair:

No, blessed to be here. So excited to get going. Go Orange.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.