



Spring 5-13-2019

Stew Salowitz on His Career as the Director of Sports Information at IWU

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Recommended Citation

Stock, Eric, "Stew Salowitz on His Career as the Director of Sports Information at IWU" (2019). *Interviews for WGLT*. 48.

https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/wgl_t_interviews/48

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Stew Salowitz, May 13, 2019

Charlie Schlenker: In the ever-changing world of collegiate athletics, you can only imagine the degrees of change Stew Salowitz has seen at Illinois Wesleyan University. After serving as publicist and statistician for the division III school's athletic programs for 31 years, Salowitz is calling it a career. It's a career that saw his role as sports information director evolve from being a media liaison to a content developer and publisher for two dozen sports programs with the advent of electronic media. Salowitz tells GLT's Eric Stock his earlier careers of radio broadcasters served him well in this new world.

Stew Salowitz: I had a pretty good handle on what broadcasters needed, you know. You needed the statistics and you needed the game notes and you needed certain things and so I had a pretty good idea of at least the kind of information to dole out to the media, having been in the media. But, you know, it's changed so much over the years that it's just become so electronic that to keep up has been a great challenge. It's just been amazing to see the technological advances over the last 30 years.

Eric Stock: So let's look at the technology at the time. Back in the 1980s, what were you working with at that point?

Salowitz: We would have, for basketball for instance, we would have a ... carbon paper's the best I can describe it. We would write as hard as we could on a piece of paper and it would go down 2 or 3 other levels down of paper and tear off the top and give it to a coach, tear off the second one and give it to a coach, tear off the third one and give it to a radio, and by the time you – If you could get 4 or 5 out of it, you'd barely read it. We also used ditto machines. Nobody knows what that is anymore – those mimeograph machines where you'd put the fluid in and rotate it around. Kids had that for tests, you know, when you're in grade school, the funny smelling ditto machine. That morphed into eventually getting a copy machine. That was one of the great days of the shirk center, I remember. Or at the Fred Young field house was the day we got a copy machine. And then that morphed into fax machines which became email and here we are today.

Stock: Could you have imagined back at the time when you started here that you would be out taking video with your phone to distribute.

Salowitz: I can't imagine it now. It is amazing – the things that have gone on and the advances, you know, we'll take a picture and it'll be on our website worldwide in just moments and live Facebook live, streaming video – it really is when you think of it. You wonder what's next. That's the thing that's gonna be really interesting, what's next.

Stock: Well, at least, you won't have to worry about that, that'll be for the rest of us youngins to deal with, right?

Salowitz: Yeah, somebody!

Stock: The transition has been dramatic not only for the technology that you've had to work with but also in the media industry itself. Local media not as robust in covering local sports as they were at the time. In quite a sense, you have become more or less your own media to a great degree.

Salowitz: Yeah, I've – and we've talked about this and my colleagues in the conference and everything. We have said over the last 5... maybe as many as 10 years that our website has become the newspaper or has become the radio or become – because of the streaming. I really see what I put on our website as the daily news. And of course we still send it to all newspapers and certainly the local newspaper. The local radio gets all of our releases and statistics and things like that but I really treat the – our website as the source for Illinois Wesleyan athletics. And you can't rely on – and I shouldn't rely on the media to do my work for me. You know that's like Bradley's issue. Back in basketball season. You're not a shield for Bradley. You can't come to our press conference but I've never considered somebody should be a shield for Illinois Wesleyan. I'm the – I'm the shield for Illinois Wesleyan.

Stock: I guess that could be empowering but that could also get a challenge when you have gone from 13 sports when you first got here to 24 programs.

Salowitz: I'm pretty well-organized. I try to keep things in compartments where we get it done and just knock it out as best we can. This week, for instance, we have men's Lacrosse NCAA and we have women's Lacrosse NCAA and we have softball NCAA. And you just have to be on top of it. Get programs done. Get rosters in from other teams. Get your computers ready to go and just work the games. It's pretty workman-like.

Stock: Working at the games is a challenge itself given the hours that you have to put in. you have your day job and then there are covering games all nights, they're on weekends, holidays, tournaments, you name it. How do you manage all of that?

Salowitz: I just came off – when I had Easter Sunday off – it was – it snapped a string of 70 straight days that I had worked in some way, shape or form. And you know you can say, or somebody would say, "Yeah, but on that day you only had to write a story about men's golf." And I say, "Well, that's a little like saying that the surgeon only had to go and do a tonsillectomy on 10-year-old kid that day." There's still a skill set – yeah this is not really fair. We still work and it just – you just get it done and I have never thought anything of it because I have a special regard for this place after you know starting here as a student even in 1972 and then the relationships I have had with the coaches and the people here, it's just – I don't think much of it. I just work and I don't think much of it 'cause I love the place so much.

Stock: And you have to love what you do.

Salowitz: Yeah, and it's the challenges of electronic media have been fascinating for me to learn and I've learned a lot from students. Andrew Freeman I'd call out right away – the former basketball player. He was a wizard at computer stuff and he would show me

shortcuts on the computer that I had no idea existed and I still use to this day, so I learned – I have learned as much from the students as they have from me – that’s for sure.

Stock: you know, we should clarify you do have grad assistance working with you at all times, but you’re still a full-time staff of one person.

Salowitz: Correct. And the addition of graduate assistants – now seven years ago I’ve had three and I think Mikayla Guthrie is my fourth and that has just been such a help because ISU’s sports management program has been terrific at helping me find and identify people to work and I hope working in the office, they get a sense of work ethic and having some fun, too. I mean, it’s sports. It’s game, so nothing is too serious

Stock: This is sound ideas. I’m Eric Stock with Stu Salowitz, the soon to be retiring sports information director at Illinois Wesleyan. Has that sunk in yet?

Salowitz: It’s not until August 30th. So that’s the good thing. I have all summer to make sure that the football rosters are in and all the schedules are on the website for the summer and I’m not gonna say I’m gonna work every day this summer but – and then hopefully we’ll have someone new in the office by the middle of summer and there’ll be some transition period so they can figure out how I have my files organized and see some of the things on computers and I – I suspect that somebody would come in with pretty good mindset of what needs to be done and it’ll continue without missing a beat and that was my goal for sticking around till the end of summer.

Stock: I’d like to get a feel for your relationship with the division III athletes. A lot of times you hear division I athletes, sometimes division II athletes all going in with the expectations that they’re going to go pro. Division III athletes generally don’t commit with that expectation this is gonna be the pinnacle of their career and you as their conduit in the media has to help them realize their full potential. So what is that then like for you?

Salowitz: I very rarely had to sit down with any student athlete and brace them on getting ready to be interviewed or anything like that. I found that the kids that are here are just bright enough and eloquent enough that they – if they are asked a question, they’re gonna be able to answer it. I don’t know how they do it and I’ve said that for years. They bring in books that are really thick and if it’s a Math book I’m just fascinated because I’m terrible at Math and I don’t know how they do it. They have the full course load. They travel so they have to miss classes. They have a game at night on Tuesday in Chicago. They drive back that night and then they have to go to class or do a presentation the next day. I am in awe of student athletes and the coaches and the teachers here have been supportive of them over the years too which has really helped.

Stock: And you talked about this being a special place. It is unique in a profession that is very transient. There is a lot of coming and going, people climbing the ladder. There is opportunities to do that at higher levels. You’ve had two sports information directors here in 50+ years all seen before you. You’ve had 3 athletic directors in that sphere of time. Mike Wagner is a fairly recent athletic director. Coaches don’t leave usually. There is a very low

turnover here. The athletic department as a whole sees very little turnover. So what do you account for that and how does that help Illinois Wesleyan sort of help maintain its position as one of the leaders in division III athletics?

Salowitz: It is a shock when coaches leave here. You're almost "Really? – you're leaving – why would..." unless there is a great opportunity and people have done that for great opportunities but coach Eash – Norm Eash for football is a year ahead of me in school here so I've known him since the early 70s and he's been here 30+ years. Coach Denis Martell has been here 30 years, I think, for basketball. Coach Bridges was here for like 75 years here I think as a coach and then administrator

Stock: Something like that?

Salowitz: something close to that any way

Stock: might have just felt like that many, yeah

Salowitz: and you know, you look at a guy like Ron Rose for basketball, he's been here 13 and Mia Smith 20. It's just a – people find a place where they wanna be and where they've had some success. Where they like the kids, where recruiting is easy – not easy, it's never easy but easier maybe because of the shirk center and some of our great facilities and all these successful teams. I mean that's job security for a sports information director 'cause it's fantastic. We win and advance and it's – I mean, - I don't know why I'm leaving now. Hold on for a second. Let me give that some thought. Now after 30 years you know, it's time. their new advancements coming in for some of the statistics programs that are gonna be interesting and I'm a little frightened by some of those. Maybe now is the right time.

Stock: You'll still be a fan, though. You'll still be around, though.

Salowitz: I will. You know, I've been to Wesleyan games before I started working here so I can't imagine they can drag me away. I enjoy the softball team a great deal and I know all the girls on the team. It's just – I'll be back to see them 'cause they're amazing to watch and basketball has been such a big part of IWU over the years. I've seen a lot of those games and yeah, I think I'll enjoy sitting in the stands and then I'll be able to see what goes on down there.

Stock: And when the game is over, your work is done. You go home.

Salowitz: I can go home, that'll be the most amazing thing. And if they're doing something on the road on a Saturday and I don't have to write a story about it or pay attention to get the statistics sent to me, I'm going 'Wow! There is a weekend. That's amazing.'

Charlie Schlenker: Retiring Illinois Wesleyan University's sports information director Stu Salowitz with GLT's Eric Stock.