WKU cuts ribbon on fieldhouse

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Attendees gather on the 50-yard line of a practice football field during a ribbon cutting and dedication ceremony for the Tim and Sarah Ford Fieldhouse at WKU on Tuesday. (JACK DOBBS / Daily News)



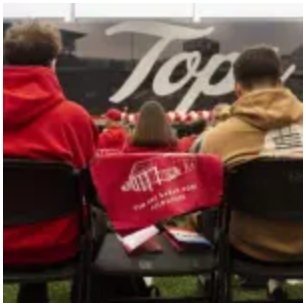







FORD FIELD







Hundreds congregate across the full-length football practice field turf of Western's newest building. Behind one wall, a baseball clubhouse spans an additional 21,000 square feet. Upstairs, a row of computers sit ready for the college's award-winning E-sports program.

Tuesday marked the ribbon-cutting and dedication for the state-of-the-art, 122,000-square-foot facility known as the Tim and Sarah Ford Fieldhouse. Located at 1715 Avenue of Champions, it serves as a training and practice space for the Big Red Marching Band and Hilltopper Athletics, and a home for the Western Kentucky University forensics and E-sports programs.

"The Tim and Sarah Ford Fieldhouse will have a generational impact because it will enable our current athletes to train at a much higher and more efficient level, while it'll also enable our sports programs to recruit at a higher level," WKU Director of Athletics Todd Stewart said.

It provides year-round training for programs and places Western "in the best position to compete from a facility standpoint in the history of WKU athletics," WKU President Tim Caboni said.

Caboni said the university had permission to spend about $60 million across the fieldhouse and WKU's new press box. WKU did so with 10%-15% investment and millions from donors, and bonds for the remainder without increasing WKU's debt load, Caboni said.

At the celebration, much credit for the facility was given to the Fords. Tim Ford, a WKU football star who had a highly successful 30-year career in the oil and gas industry, has directly impacted WKU Athletics "in countless ways" Stewart added — from mentoring players, to providing meaningful connections, to purchasing suits to aid the players in their professional lives.

"Simply put, we do not have our recent success and national relevancy without them," Stewart said. "This new commitment to our fieldhouse will take that impact to an entirely new level."

Tim Ford described it as daunting and strange to walk into a facility with his name on it.

"Being someone who played here and was a student here, and to go off and have a career built on much of what I learned here, and to come back and give to it with my wife and my family — it's incredible," he added.

WKU senior football player Jackson Smith said the fieldhouse benefits players, as practicing outside during the rain makes it harder to do what they need to.

It's nicer, he added, than even some Southeastern Conference schools.

"It's awesome," he said.

Band

The fieldhouse provides Western's 270-member band its first in-person home and a place notably protected from inclement weather.

Previously, practices were held at the intramural sports field, the track and field facility across the railroad tracks, the South Lawn and, when available, the Houchens Industries-L.T. Smith Stadium, Caboni said.

Isaiah Owens, senior band member, said that while he's sad he can't use it next year, he's excited for the rest of the band to finally have their own place to practice.

"For 100 years, this program has created opportunities for students to discover their talents and their potential — but today, that opportunity expands in a very real way," the band Director Matthew McCurry said. "This facility (…) gives our students the chance to rehearse without limits, to build their skills and push themselves to new levels that they have yet to define."

Forensics

The fieldhouse meets a need for Western's growing, nationally award-winning forensics program — which has surpassed 40 students who continually practice in classrooms, conference rooms, auditoriums and basements.

Functioning without a dedicated space, Caboni said, is "a disruptive and unsustainable process not reflective of a championship caliber program."

In the past 20 years alone, WKU Forensics has earned dozens of collegiate speech and debate national championships, WKU Director of Forensics Ganer Newman said. The program, Caboni added, is "oldest and unquestionably most successful student organization in WKU history."

"For the first time in our organization's long history, the WKU forensics program will have a permanent home (…), Newman said.

E-Sports

In serving WKU's E-sports team, the fieldhouse also fills a need for a program that has become increasingly popular and highly competitive.

Forty-five varsity E-sports athletes represent WKU across four national titles, and eight of 10 teams advanced to the playoffs this year, Caboni said. Last weekend, they played in the Union 10 tournament for League of Legends at University of Missouri-Columbia — and won the finals against one of the U.S.'s top League of Legends teams in Stony Brook University, E-sports Faculty Advisor Patricia Todd said.

Students practiced out of a supply closet in the Garrett Conference Center before moving to the basement of McCormick Hall, where they'd çross the street for the restroom.

"You can see, we've come a long way," Todd said.

She pointed to a fieldhouse wall, with the slogan, "Climb Higher."

"Our students have done that," she said.