

DIVISION I

FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP
TECHNOLOGY & FAN ENGAGEMENT

The role of technology in intercollegiate athletics is growing every day and it is having a dramatic impact on the marketing and media initiatives we are all implementing to enhance the positive exposure for our programs and student-athletes. Within the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), the Northeast Conference (NEC) has been at the forefront of creative and technological advances during the last two years, highlighted by the introduction of NECFrontRow.com. At Central Connecticut State University (CCSU), we have fully committed to the NEC's vision for a conference-wide online video presence.



Paul Schlickmann



In August 2012, the NEC launched a unique, dedicated, live streaming and video site for its members; NECFrontRow.com. The site, which is known around the conference simply as FrontRow, is the hub for all live web streams for any athletics event hosted by a member institution. The site is also a platform for each institution to upload highlights, features or any other original video content that the institution creates. The primary impetus for the NEC's emphasis on video and its presence on social media is to maximize fan engagement and ultimately enhance the NEC Brand. In addition to this cutting edge concept, the NEC made a significant financial investment to subsidize the purchase of the requisite video/broadcast equipment by all member institutions. Thus, through FrontRow, NEC schools are providing their fans with hundreds of HD quality broadcasts across a wide range of sports. As a conference, the growth of our technology has allowed us to provide our fans with television-quality broadcasts not only for basketball and football, but for many of our Olympic sports as well.

At CCSU, we have made this facet of our multi-media operation and offerings a priority for the past two years. By locking arms philosophically and functionally with the NEC, I believe we are ahead of the curve amongst institutions in our peer conferences and are reaping the benefits of these initiatives in myriad positive ways. In the case of NECFrontRow, this enhanced technology has allowed us to provide our fans with the option of watching games live in high definition on their computer, tablet or smart phone. Our fans have become more engaged not only because of our home game productions, but also because they can access the same quality broadcasts for any of our NEC away games.

From a campus perspective, we have also followed the conference's lead and maximized our fan engagement through various video and social media platforms. The primary vehicle for our efforts is our website, CCSUBlueDevils.com. In August, we completed the second major redesign of our webpage in the last three years. The most recent iteration of the site was built with a clear, increased emphasis on video and social media capabilities and options. The website's main page features high definition video, either directly from our site or through video uploaded via YouTube. Below the fold, CCSUBlueDevils.com features an embedded YouTube video player and a Twitter widget that displays tweets from our department's two official twitter feeds (@CCSUBlueDevils and @KizerBlueDevil) as well as my own (@PaulSchlickmann).

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Implementing this technology and providing these services to our external constituents is only one step to increase fan engagement. Another critical aspect is providing a high quality gameday product and experience to our fans in the stands. Just after the launch of FrontRow, we installed a state of the art video scoreboard at Arute Field, home to our football and lacrosse teams. It is the signature piece of our newly constructed and expanded Outdoor Athletics Complex; not only for its location, size and aesthetic appeal, but for the multitude of ways it engages and improves the fan experience.

The timing of the video board addition with the launch of FrontRow, though unintentional, could not have been more synergistic to combine two effective forms of technology. Not only did the camera, recording and replay equipment associated with our new video board facilitate our production of high quality in-game entertainment for our fans, it allowed us to stream an exceptional HD product through NECFrontRow.com. Thanks in large part to the equipment associated with our video board, our video streams of football contests during the 2012-13 seasons included multiple camera angles and instant replays, features that truly elevated the level of our product online and for fans at the game.

Another significant factor in our ability to produce excellent football content was our association with the Pack Network. The Pack Network is a northeast-based agency providing college athletics departments and conferences with solutions for web design, video streaming and HD television production. The Pack has a strong history with the NEC and worked with the conference to build the FrontRow concept and platform. We took our focus on creative, quality broadcasts and our association with the Pack Network to yet another level in the winter, joining forces with them to produce HD quality broadcasts of all our men's and women's basketball games. The combination of our video stream simulcast with the play-by-play of our radio announcers created a high quality "television-like" broadcast that can be viewed anywhere with a few clicks on a smart device.

As the director of athletics at Central Connecticut, I feel very fortunate to be associated with a Conference whose leadership (Commissioner Noreen Morris, our Presidents and our Athletics Directors) has set a strategic course that prioritizes both conference and institutional commitment to these initiatives as a means to serve our fan base, provide well deserved exposure to our student-athletes and enhance the overall brand of our conference and our exceptional institutions. During a time when we are all wrestling with the financial challenges associated with funding highly competitive programs, the Northeast Conference has set the bar very high in terms of technological creativity and financial efficiency. At Central Connecticut, we are reaching that bar and our fans are enjoying the benefits of our technological investment and foresight.

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