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Gardner-Webb University Alumni Recall Experience of First-Ever Carolina Panthers Game in Charlotte

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Office of University
Communications

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20 Years Ago, GWU Team Assisted Photographers Whose Images Created “Carolina Panthers Sunday” Book

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—From the top of the stadium scoreboard to the football field below and the surrounding city streets, Gardner-Webb University students, alumni and staff experienced the National Football League from seats in the middle of all the action.

The GWU team at what is now Bank of America Stadium

Twenty years ago this month, when the Carolina Panthers played their first-ever home game in Charlotte, a GWU group served as assistants for a team of award-winning professional photographers who captured the historic moments of that day, Sept. 1, 1996.

Beginning hours before game time, continuing throughout the game and concluding hours after it ended, GWU community members helped transport, organize and operate equipment for photographers who told the story of the momentous occasion through images of the people involved. “The photographers shared with us what they were doing, how they were doing it and why they were doing it,” explains Noel Manning, a 1994 GWU alumnus. “To learn from photographers from publications like Sports Illustrated and National Geographic over the course of the day was the kind of amazing experience that doesn’t come around often.”

A view from the stadium

Photos from the day were organized into a book, “Carolina Panthers Sunday,” which chronicles a behind-the-scenes experience of the Panthers’ first game in their home stadium. James Julian, a 1998 GWU alumnus, keeps a copy of the book in his office as a reminder of his involvement. His assistant role allowed him to meet Panthers owner and founder Jerry Richardson, work a remote-operated camera to photograph players during pre-game introductions and climb atop the scoreboard for pictures from the stadium’s highest vantage point. “I remember being able to walk literally anywhere in the stadium because of our credentials and not be questioned,” Julian recalls. “I had a lot of great experiences at Gardner-Webb. Within my degree major, this was by far the greatest.”

Longtime N.Y. Times photographer Nicole Bengiveno

Opportunities such as “Carolina Panthers Sunday” are a common benefit of student life at Gardner-Webb, adds 1998 alumnus Karen Brower Rhodes. “This experience was like others at Gardner-Webb in that it was personal,” she assesses. “The faculty members mentored us and

Karen Brower Rhodes

For Gary Eller, a 1997 GWU graduate who now works as a professional photographer, participation in the project led directly to his eventual career. “I remember standing on that field with 70,000 people cheering, and I got to be on the field for free,” he reminisces. “Looking back on it now, I know it was a defining moment in my career choice. I wanted to be a professional photographer.”

Manning, who has also worked with photography and videography throughout his career, revisits the “Carolina Panthers Sunday” book as each football season begins and reflects on the day of the game, which the Panthers won, 29-6. “I remember the excitement that was there in Charlotte on day one,” he shares. “As a team from Gardner-Webb, it was pretty amazing to realize that we were a part of history.”

The GWU team with Dom Capers, center, the Panthers' head coach at the time

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University's purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).