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Law degree pays off for UIS compliance officer

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University of Illinois Springfield assistant athletics director for compliance Alison Fitzgerald.

By **MARCIA MARTINEZ** (marcia.martinez@sj-r.com)
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University of Wisconsin sports were the end-all and be-all in Alison Fitzgerald's young life.

"I went with my dad to a Wisconsin basketball game, saw Michael Finley and I wanted to be a Badger ever since," said Fitzgerald, who grew up in suburban Madison, Wis. "It was about the same time our football team won the Rose Bowl (on Jan. 1, 1994). Ever since then I've been a huge Badger fan.

"I didn't know there was basketball and football outside of the Big Ten until I was older."

The 26-year-old has branched out since then. She is consumed with athletics as it relates to the Great Lakes Valley Conference and NCAA Division II. Fitzgerald is the assistant director of athletics for compliance at the University of Illinois Springfield. It's her job to know the NCAA and GLVC rules and regulations and keep the Prairie Stars' athletic department in line with them.

She is an integral figure as the university makes the transition from NAIA to NCAA Division II. UIS is set to become a full Division II member in the 2010-11 academic year.

"Without Ali we would not be at the stage of the game where we are now," UIS athletic director Rodger Jehlicka said. "There is no way. I can't even put a value on her position. That is without a doubt.

"She's a lawyer, and that's a huge plus for us and for her. There's a lot of Division IIs that would love to have a sports lawyer in her position."

Impressive resume

Fitzgerald, who is also the senior woman administrator in the UIS athletic department, became the first compliance director at the school in June 2008 after graduating from Marquette University with a Juris Doctorate. She completed her bachelor's degree at Wisconsin.

Internships at the Marquette athletic department, Wisconsin-Parkside and the NCAA Office of Government Relations in Washington D.C., gave Fitzgerald a taste of the working world.

Her time spent in the nation's capital during the summer of 2007 produced one of her most enjoyable moments.

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Fitzgerald attended NCAA Champions Day at the White House. The event takes place annually on the South Lawn and honors NCAA championship teams in various sports.

Because Fitzgerald grew up an avid sports fan, working inside an athletic department is an ideal profession for her. She competed in gymnastics, soccer, tee-ball, volleyball, tennis and track and field as a youngster.

"I went into law school knowing I wanted to do the sports law program but not thinking I wanted to be a sports agent or do professional sports," she said. "I just didn't think my personality really worked with the sports agent-type of personality, and I thought it would make me hate sports working in the professional realm and seeing the ugly side of it. I knew I wanted to do sports law and kind of use my law skills within college athletics."

Knowing the rules

Eligibility matters are keeping her busy these days. That is often the case in the fall, according to Fitzgerald.

"The biggest challenge is there's never an easy answer," she said. "I'm still at the point where I still have to look things up. I might double-check with the conference office and do some research, so it's different in the sense that every day there's a different question."

All of her time isn't spent in her office studying documents or examining the NCAA manual.

UIS athletes pay Fitzgerald frequent social visits. Her office is located nearest to where they enter and exit the athletic department.

She travels occasionally with various teams. Sometimes it's required and sometimes it's not.

A reward for a job well done isn't given to Fitzgerald in meetings or conventions. Her payoff comes when sitting in the stands or bleachers watching a UIS athletic event.

"Going to the games and actually seeing them enjoy all the work that's put into it makes me feel happy," she said.

Marcia Martinez can be reached at 788-1547.

Getting to know Alison Fitzgerald

*High school sports: Played volleyball and soccer at Verona (Wis.) Area High School

*Favorite female pro athletes: Tennis players Venus and Serena Williams

*Favorite male pro athlete: Minnesota Vikings QB Brett Favre

*Favorite college athlete: Former Wisconsin basketball star Michael Finley

*Hobbies: Traveling, reading and spending time with friends

*Favorite sport to play: Soccer growing up and sand volleyball now

*Televised sporting event she'd never miss: March Madness

*Best sports movie: "Above the Rim"
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