

Hunter Sparling:

Hello and welcome back to the I Am WT podcast. I'm your host, Hunter Sparling.

Brooke Nemeth:

And I'm your other host, Brooke Nemeth.

Hunter Sparling:

And today, we are joined by Doug Lipinski. Mr. Doug?

Doug Lipinski:

How's it going?

Hunter Sparling:

Do you mind introducing yourself for us?

Doug Lipinski:

Yeah. So Doug Lipinski and I'm the new vice president for athletics here at WT.

Brooke Nemeth:

Do you want to tell us where you grew up, where you went to school, something about your family?

Doug Lipinski:

Yeah. No, absolutely. So I'm coming from the Great Lake state, Michigan, about 1,200 miles away. Grew up north of Detroit, in a town called Sterling Heights. Played every sport that you could imagine from basketball, baseball, pond hockey, boy scouts, bowling, you name it. We had four kids in the family, so I had an older sister and two younger sisters. So I think mom and dad basically just wanted to get us out of the house a little bit and go and run outside. So, yeah, we were very active as a family and grew up in a blue collar household. My dad worked for Ford Motor Company, and we're big Tigers fans and Lions fans. So Tigers doing pretty well right now in the playoffs. Yeah, so from there, excelled at baseball. I had an opportunity to go to Central Michigan University, a division one program in the middle of the state, and exactly what you guys are doing, I thought I was going to be a broadcaster. And so I went up there, and my first three semesters, I took speech classes and all that.

And I do remember... I'll tell you a quick story. I was in one class and we had to do a presentation. And this other classmate gets up there and he starts talking. I'm thinking, "Ooh, okay, he's got the, quote-unquote, it. I don't have it. Is there anything behind the camera?" Right? That's when I started thinking at that point because he was extremely talented. Then I had an opportunity to transfer. I transferred to Grand Valley State and played baseball there for the next four years. And instead of going to broadcasting, going into advertising and public relations, stayed on after I graduated and became the assistant baseball coach. Coach Steve Lyon, who was from Oakland University, which is north of Detroit and recruited me out of high school a little bit, and so I knew of him, he knew of me, and he gave me my first job in intercollegiate athletics and I became the assistant baseball coach. Did that for four years.

And then at that time, also went back and got my master's in public administration and thought, "Well, you know what? I want to be a head baseball coach at the college level and that's what I'm going to do." And after my four years, had an opportunity actually to stay at Grand Valley to become the marketing director. And at that time, sports marketing was a little bit different than it is today with social media and everything, but I was just one of those guys that was creative and thought, "You know what? This could

be something," and I knew eventually I was going to get into administration after maybe being a head coach for 10, 15 years, but this opportunity presented itself a little bit earlier in my career and I jumped on it and was very blessed that, for the next 20-plus years, I was able to move up the ranks at Grand Valley as the university changed. The university was changing and growing and it just happened to be perfect timing of my career as well. And I didn't have to go anywhere.

And then, typically, as they tell folks, "If you want to grow in your career, you're going to have to probably move institutions. Somebody's in the position that you would like to have and you have to move around." And I was just really fortunate that I was able to grow as the institution grew and the athletic department grew, and we added sports, and we had great success. And when you have those great successes, you're going to have opportunities throughout the years. And, again, very fortunate that maybe I didn't take those at that time and I was able to grow. And so my last stop for the last seven years, I've been the deputy director of athletics for external relations, and that basically is everything that, again, you guys are doing. Social media, broadcasting, revenue generation, when it comes to corporate sponsorships and donations. And so they knew how to keep us busy and we enjoyed it along the way, and then obviously had a great opportunity here.

Hunter Sparling:

So going back to the beginning of your story, you said you're from Michigan. That is a ways away. So the question I have, and this goes for everybody that's from a far away state, what brought you here?

Doug Lipinski:

Yeah. So the opportunity, right? Dr. Wendler gave me a call, and then followed up with a phone call from Dr. Terry, and we had some great conversations and they really sold the vision of this place and where we are right now and where we want to go. And then you start really... Now I knew about West Texas A&M and obviously competing against them for the last couple decades, but when you're looking at those opportunities, you got to really get into the weeds on what everything looks like, and it gets down to people. And the people here in the panhandle are unbelievable. I've been here... I don't know, about 50 days or so or a little bit less, and it's been awesome. And so the institution has a vision, like I said, of what they want to do and the growth mindset and I just matched it up and said, "You know what? My skill set matches to what this opportunity is."

With that said, obviously brought it to the family. And I have two boys, 16 and 14, and a beautiful wife that we've been married over 20-plus years. And we talked about it, and we talked about it a little bit more, and we talked about it again and again. And this was a family decision. When you're in intercollegiate athletics, it's not a job, it's not a career, it's a lifestyle. So when you look at tomorrow, we have men's soccer, women's soccer, we have tailgating, we have football. I have a speaking engagement earlier in the morning and later in the afternoon. I mean, you have to live it. Right? And you have to enjoy what you do. If it's just a job, an eight-to-five, you're going to get out of the business real quick because there's a lot of night and weekends, and your family has to understand that and they have to enjoy what you do and embrace it. And I've been very fortunate and very blessed that my family has. And so, yeah, the other thing is 101 more days of sunshine here than where I'm coming from.

Hunter Sparling:

So the people in the panhandle, you said you've been here for 50 days?

Doug Lipinski:

Roughly. Yeah.

Hunter Sparling:

I'm here to tell you it's not going to change. I've lived here for 21 years and it's the same kind people, it won't change.

Brooke Nemeth:

That's right. People from the panhandle are definitely a different kind of person. And you said your kids are 14 and 16? That's definitely a hard age to move, especially when you're in high school. Has there anything that surprised you about the panhandle compared to Michigan?

Doug Lipinski:

I don't know. I mean, there's obviously different nuances and I've lived in the state of Michigan my entire life, now different sides of Michigan, the east side where Detroit is where most people in the United States and in the world think about Michigan, they think about Detroit. When you get to the west side of the state, which is about three hours away, it's completely different. It's where people from Detroit and people from Chicago vacation, if that tells you anything. Beautiful beaches on Lake Michigan. And so the pace is a little bit different as well. So when you come to a place like this, obviously there is quite a bit difference when you deal with climate. It's high desert, so we're used to having inland lakes, and evergreen trees, and all that different.

Hunter Sparling:

That's right [inaudible 00:08:29].

Doug Lipinski:

Right? So that's what everyone says. But we also receive 90 inches of snow, and then in March, the brown slush and what that looks like. So for us, it's been great. We're looking forward to what the winter's going to look like. We hear it gets very windy here in the spring, but, again, we're used to a little bit of wind in Allendale, Michigan coming off the lake, and you'd get lake effect weather as well. So that's something that we don't have to worry about here. But, yeah, no, we've enjoyed it, and like I said, there's just little nuances when people talk about. The hospitality, it's real. The pace is a little bit different. It's a little bit slower. Sometimes that's good, sometimes that's not so good with people that are in athletics, and there's a pace that you want to be at all the time to obviously accomplish things in that.

But the Midwest, obviously, the values are very similar to how we grew up and what it is here. It's different than the East Coast. Right? When you think about the East Coast in Boston, New York, it's very fast-paced. You get to the Midwest and it slows down a little bit. And then as you come down a little bit further south, it slows down a little bit more. And that's true. But, yeah, we're enjoying learning those things and this is a family journey and an adventure for us and we're embracing it. We're looking forward to going on the road with some of our teams and so that my boys can see different places as well. And they're used to traveling with dad and going to different games and cheering on the away team.

Hunter Sparling:

So moving here, when I was a waiter, this was years ago, we would get people off the highway from different states. They would come in and they would say they were expecting us all to be cowboys, basically. They expected everybody to be riding around on a horse. But I'm glad that you got to see the southern hospitality and know that it is such a real thing. And I do believe that is one of the big reasons why we do get a lot of people. It's just because we're kind.

You come from an area, like you said, New York, New York is a very not kind place if we're being honest. And then they come here and people are treating them like they've known them. And I think that's a good look not only for Texas, but for us. And it just opens up everybody to just know what kindness is. And I say all the time, I wish that New York or somewhere else could just watch a live stream of Canyon

on 24/7 just to see how the people are. And maybe it would make them think, "Maybe we just need to be a little nicer."

Doug Lipinski:

Yeah. So I think the interesting thing, and we're talking about recruiting in our department and enrollment as an institution and all that, things are a little bit different. One, here, the travel is real for our student athletes. Going five hours, five and a half, six hours to compete is an average day. Where I'm coming from, the conference, you're looking at a couple hours. Right? So if you had to go six hours, that was the long trip. And so one of those things is density, right? You're dealing with Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Columbus, whatever it may be, Milwaukee. There's metropolitan areas. So there's more people in [inaudible 00:12:09] spaces. And so imagine if you're in New York City, the apartments are a little bit smaller, there's more people, you're going to probably be on edge a little bit more. Thus, maybe the rudeness of humans may come out.

Here, you do have to rely on your neighbor. There's a little bit more space. There's not a Walmart every 10 miles. There may be one Walmart, and then you have to drive a ways to find another one. And so you do have to rely on your neighbors and the people in your community to get things done. And I think that's precious, really. And so when we look at those things, we look at all the positives and what we're able to do and bring people to campus. We believe that's our greatest value. And when it comes to what we do is obviously get the word out about WT. We want to have great success in everything that we do. We're highly competitive. We want to win, but we want to represent the institution the right way.

Hunter Sparling:

All right. We're going to take a quick break, and then we're going to come right back and ask some more questions. Stick with it.

Speaker 4:

Donors to West Texas A&M University give more than their material support. They devote time, expertise, and commitment. WT would not be what it is today without individuals dedicated to our forward progress.

Brooke Nemeth:

Welcome back to the I Am WT podcast. This morning, we have Doug Lipinski with us. Do you want to talk about your previous roles a little bit more and how did those experience prepare you for this position at WT?

Doug Lipinski:

Yeah. So, again, being a former student athlete and competing at the division two level, and obviously WT is a division two school, so you know what to expect there. And then being a coach and all the things that goes into being a coach. And then, obviously, as an administrator and from a marketing perspective, and I've lived in the external world, and again, that is generating revenue. You need to do that at a place of higher education. You need to find ways to fund things and work through budgets, and then be very creative. And I think that's one of my strengths is not being just creative through external and being, "Hey, we want to do this on social media," or, "How about this great idea and let's have some fun and let's do throwback uniforms?" That's all great too.

But also from a strategic standpoint and being creative, and how you're able to do a budget, and how can you work with the team, and what do those things look like, and how can you collaborate with other departments on campus and what's going to be best for what I call the mothership, and that's the institution. And so the institution is the heart. And as long as the heart is doing well, the limbs, whatever,

or any other organ you want to call us, every department and... We're going to be fine. And I think one of the things that when you come and you look at places of higher education, it's very often people want to be in their own silos and they just want to worry about their department. And I think that's a little bit of human nature, but to have the elevation of a 60,000-foot view of what the institution wants to do and how you can play a role in it, I think is extremely important. And not everybody can do that. And I do believe that's a gift of mine that I can do that.

But also, having in my background, being able to get into the weeds, and I'll hang banners with folks, and I'll cut grass, and all those type of things as well, because that's always been my background. And so, yeah, I think all those experiences get you to a place where when you become the director of athletics and you're overseeing coaches and that... I've been in the trenches. I understand where they're coming from. I understand what our student-athletes are going through. And so my responsibility and our goal is to create the best student-athlete experience possible. I want them to come here, I want them to enjoy their experience. With that said, it's not going to be easy. There's time management, there's a lot of travel, there's going to be adversity. It could be on the fields and on the courts, it could be in the classrooms, it could be personal, it could be social. They're going to be with us for four or five years and things aren't always unicorns and rainbows. Right? You're going to go through life.

But we're here. And the great thing is we have teams. And I think, really, you can't really discount the support you get from a team and a brotherhood and a sisterhood that you're going to go through for the next four or five years. And so for us, that's what we concentrate on is creating that best student-athlete experience. We believe that helps with retention of students as well because we're creating that environment forum. And for us, that's a competitive advantage if we can create that type of experience.

Hunter Sparling:

You mentioned a team. Now I grew up, I didn't do sports. My school, it had football and it had basketball, and that was it. There were no other sports. So I did the only thing I could do and that was FFA. And I did FFA for 12 years. And you said that the team is a support group, and I completely agree with you on that because that team that I had was one of the greatest things that I ever had. Taught me everything and got me to where I am, really, I'd like to say. So right now, if you're in a team, I highly recommend staying with your team, supporting with your team, and allowing your team to support you. Now, I know when you're really passionate about a job and you read that job description, you always have these other things that are your specific priorities. What are your specific priorities for this position?

Doug Lipinski:

Okay. So before I get into that, one of the nuances about Texas is all the acronyms. So I have no idea what FFA is, and people are telling me to go to the ABC, and then you go over to the JBK, and you go over... In the Midwest, we call the IT department the IT department. There's no acronym for the IT department. Right? It's information technology. So that is something that is very unique that we're learning that everything has an acronym. So what is the FFA?

Hunter Sparling:

So the FFA is the Future Farmers of America.

Doug Lipinski:

Okay, thank you.

Hunter Sparling:

Yeah. And that's more of a school group right there. And then there's 4-H. 4-H is more of a county deal, and that's stock showing and all that. I just did the stock showing with the school.

Doug Lipinski:  
Okay, awesome.

Hunter Sparling:  
FFA, Future Farmers of America.

Doug Lipinski:

Yeah, no, that's great. And I think one of the things too is we have an opportunity here at WT to add clubs and those organizations because what we just got done talking about, not everyone's going to be on varsity athletics. We have 16 varsity sports, we have roughly 450 student athletes. But when you look at enrollment, and growth, and just the culture, and the vibe, and the spirit of campus, the more clubs you can have that people still want to compete and they still want to do stuff in groups, that is the team. And if you're involved and you're engaged in stuff, the retention rates are higher. Right? And when you look at it from an institution, what is our goal, is our goal is to graduate students and help society through higher education. And so if you have a tough first semester, you're a freshman, and you don't know anybody and you're not part of a group, you might want to go home. Right? And so now that is putting a... For you, you got to make those decisions over what the next few years are going to look like.

But if you're a part of a team and you're part of a group and you're doing things like what you guys are doing, you're engaged in what's happening, you're more likely to finish out and get your degree, and then move on and be successful in your career. And so those are the reasons why you put those things together and why you want to expand clubs and groups on campus. And I know from WT's standpoint, that's one of their priorities. My main priority as the vice president of athletics is, one, make sure that we have a voice for our 450 student-athletes on campus because they do so much for our campus. And, again, like I said, on a Wednesday, you're traveling to Oklahoma, that's five hours away. So they're at a disadvantage when it comes to that class that they're missing on Wednesday, and they got to get out in front of it and they got to work with the professor and they might need to have to get a tutor.

And they're taking a bus. It's not like we're flying in and out when we do that. So that's a full day of travel. And then they compete and they're wearing the trademark. They're wearing the WT and they're representing all 9,000 students and all of our alums. And we take that seriously. And so that's one, is the voice. And for us, I think, overall, from a vision standpoint, and that is we want to create the best student-athlete experience. We want them to have a great experience here, which, ultimately, parlays into the fan experience, which is students. The student body coming out and enjoying events. Again, it's the same thing. If you come out to one of our football games, you come out to a basketball game and you enjoy it with your roommates and that, that's part of your experience, your four years, and we get to play a role in that. And so we'll continue to expand that and have some fun with that.

And then I want to make WT a national brand, and I believe that there's a number of things here that are in place and the athletic department needs to play a major role in that. And so we have to get out there and we have to tell people about our success. We have to tell people about this institution, and that's going to be a major priority for us over the next 12 to 18 months. And as I was already talking to you guys earlier, before we started this, do you know any people that do video? Do you know any students that do graphic design? We're going to hire a lot of students. I believe in that because I believe in creating those experiences for our undergrads. Right? Before they get out and they want to work for the Dallas Cowboys or whatever they want to do, we want them to get their experience here with us.

And we need them. We have a lot of talented students on campus and from an athletic department, we need to utilize those students. We want to give them experience. We want them to be part of our team and we want to tell the rest of the world about what we're doing here. And when you're on a place of higher education, I will tell you this, that there is education that has to be done on campus. And so we have to educate folks about our department and what we're trying to do. You can't just expect people to know

what we're doing. And I think sometimes you do. Because you're on a place of higher education, you think there's a lot of smart people, and there are. There's a lot of smart people when you're on a college campus, but that doesn't mean that they understand what you're doing and what you're trying to do for the institution.

Hunter Sparling:

You said hiring the students, making sure they get that experience that they need. And going to the first point when you were mentioning clubs and all that, I highly recommend joining a club. I joined this organization through one class. I was in one class and I was completely involved. I think, a lot of times, it comes down to people being scared and being nervous of meeting the new people and just getting into it. But I'm here to tell you it's one of the easiest and greatest things ever. You can join that organization, if it relates to your major, then you can learn if you really want to keep going or if you want to think about something else. I'm thankful I joined this because not only did it confirm what I want to do, but now it's giving me just tons and tons of experience like this right here. And that, to me, is just one of the best things that's happened to me since I came here.

Brooke Nemeth:

Right. I feel like joining clubs, it gets your foot in the door, it gets your name known, and it helps you a lot for after you graduate and whatever future you have with whatever you're doing.

Doug Lipinski:

Well, it's exactly what you're doing right now. You're gaining valuable experience, right? Very low risk. And so we call that, in athletics, competitive advantage. Right? So now you have an advantage over another student at another institution because they're going to get their degree, and it might be in journalism, might be in communications, whatever, but maybe they didn't commit the time and the effort to go through this and get that experience. And so now you already know how to do those type of things. You already know how to edit and put on a podcast.

And so we have all those opportunities here. And what we want to do in athletics is we want to connect those dots and we want our students to play a larger role in what we're doing in the athletic department, and we're going to have more students participate in what we're trying to do when you talk about name, image, and likeness and that as an institution. They're going to have a say. But we have to involve them. We have to collaborate and we have to go out there and tell them that we're looking for help. You can't just expect students to come your way. It's like the wanted sign. You got to put out there and let people know that you're looking for folks. And that's what we're doing.

Hunter Sparling:

And this goes back... A lot of people, I think, they get scared that they're not going to be accepted. But the biggest mistake you can make when it comes to joining a club or making new friends is not going. That is the first mistake you can make. And the second mistake is not engaging with them. And if you do both of those things, you'll find that you're just not going to be as happy as everybody else involved in an organization. Just go. You're not going to fumble. Go.

Doug Lipinski:

Yeah, no, absolutely. You have to take the first step, right? And the first step's usually the scariest. But, again, you talked about the people here on campus and in the community, they're very welcoming. And for us, again, we're used to being around teams. And so that's the environment that I'm used to from a culture standpoint is that we're all in it together. We're all rowing in the same direction. And it's that synergy that you're putting together and there's goals. There's goals that you're trying to accomplish, and

hopefully you can succeed and have success in that. And that's where you're able to bring some folks along that you're not the starting quarterback, you're not the starting point guard, but maybe you're handling the clock, maybe you're doing the social media account. Those are type of things that you're part of the overall team and program that we have.

Hunter Sparling:

There's nothing better than having a whole organization on speed dial.

Brooke Nemeth:

That's right. Earlier, you mentioned something about fan engagement, and especially with homecoming this weekend, do you have any specific plans on getting the community involved in WT athletics?

Doug Lipinski:

Yeah. So, again, for us, we have to get out in the community even more than what we do right now. And I think as I've only been here less than two months, we'll continue to work on what we would call our structure within the department to give us the ability to go out into the community and do bigger and bolder things. I will tell you, obviously a target market for us is going to be Amarillo. We're going to, quote-unquote, live there a little bit in how we operate from a marketing perspective and getting into the community. And then the other one too, and we're not going to shy away from it, is there's folks about 90 minutes south of us and they're competitors of ours. And we're going to go full force and we're going to work on what we need to do as an institution, but also as a department to promote ourself, and we're looking forward to that. So you're going to see us being very creative in the marketplace, and there'll be some new things that we'll roll out next fall.

And you'll probably see some things in the spring with certain events in that. And I'll give you one. We're doing the blacktop event on October 21st, so it's Monday night right there on 26th Street, where we're basically going to be playing basketball right in the middle of campus. And we're going to have some fun games and give away, hopefully rent for a semester where if somebody hits one of these halfcourt shots that we're going to do, and the team's going to be out there in uniforms and we're bringing in lights and music, and we're right there. So we're going to do those fun things to engage our student body. That hasn't been done here on campus, that particular event, but that event is coming up and we're looking forward to that. So expect more of those type of things that we're going to do because I think that, again, is the value that we bring. Obviously, we want to introduce you to our basketball team, get to know our basketball team, so you'll come out to basketball games later. They're both really good. Our men's and women's teams are extremely talented and very competitive.

And that doesn't happen on every campus. And I think, again, as if you're a part of the student body to understand that that we have really good athletics and they're really competitive, and don't miss the opportunity to go out and check them out. You don't have to be an athletic person. But once in a while, you might want to come out and just get some popcorn and chill on a Thursday night and watch a game. Just show your ID and you get into the game. But if you don't, five years from now or four years from now, you're never going to have... Now you're an alum and those type of things, and it's going to cost you a couple bucks to come back as an alum and those [inaudible 00:30:50]. But, yeah, so that's what we're going to try to do. You're going to see more of these special events. You're going to see us out in the community more. We're going to bring more people to campus with some third-party events, and we believe that's what we need to do.

Hunter Sparling:

So what would you say, in the time that you've been here, what does WT mean to you?



Doug Lipinski:

Yeah, great question. I think it's obviously evolving in what it means to me, but we've already touched on it. I mean, I believe it's about community. When I look at the logo, that's the first thing that comes to mind now. It's a very welcoming place, and I think those are the things that we need to talk about. The other thing is not only is it great community and welcoming, but growth. And I've told our head coaches, and our coaching staff, and our support staff, I don't think, in a lot of ways, we can even see our ceiling right now as an institution.

You have to remember, I'm coming from the outside and now coming in and looking at all the things that we have and people that obviously have been here for a while. And I was one of those people at Grand Valley. Right? And looking at it and be like, "Oh, wow, we got some great things," but you get used to things as well, positives and negatives, but there are so many positives here and we need to tell that story. And so when I think about what WT is, I think it's about growth. I think it's about community and endless opportunities.

Hunter Sparling:

I 100% agree. There are so many opportunities here that people just aren't taking advantage of. You have to get out there.

Brooke Nemeth:

Right. Definitely, the sky's the limit, especially when it comes to sports and athletics in college. Well, we appreciate you being here with us today.

Hunter Sparling:

We had a lot of fun, and I hope our listeners learn more about you, learn more about what you stand for, and I hope we're able to see you some more out in the fields.

Doug Lipinski:

Yeah. No, I appreciate you having me. And go Buffs.

Hunter Sparling:

Go Buffs. Well, thank you all for tuning in for today's episode of I Am WT. I'm your host, Hunter Sparling.

Brooke Nemeth:

I'm Brooke Nemeth.

Hunter Sparling:

And we'll see you next time.