

A Sporting Chance

Retired athletics director built up both integrity and facilities

"If you seek his monument, look around you," reads the Quad-side marker for John Milton Gregory, the first president of the University of Illinois.

The same may be said of **Ron Guenther '67 AHS, MS '68 AHS.**

For UI students, alumni and friends, a quick drive down Florida and Kirby avenues is all it takes to get a sense of the physical legacy the athletics director left behind upon retiring on July 1.

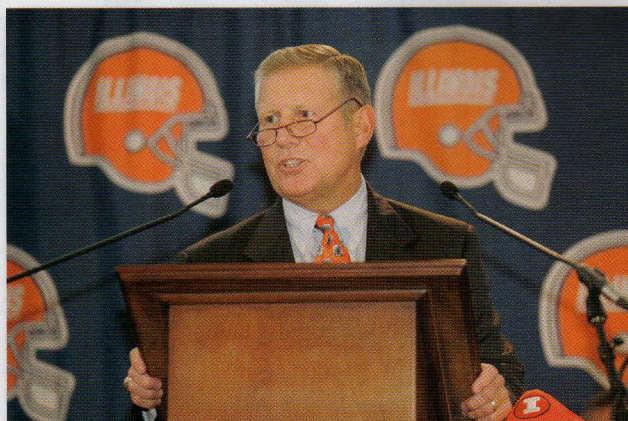
Beginning in 1992, Guenther oversaw the construction of new facilities for softball, tennis and golf; practice complexes for football and basketball; and the University's first athletics administration building. He supervised major renovations of the baseball field and the soccer and track stadium, as well as the creation of an academic center for student-athletes.

In the 19 years of Guenther's tenure, he averaged one athletics facility being built or overhauled every 18 months, the crown jewel being the \$121 million renovation of Memorial Stadium, completed in 2008.

But Guenther did not leave his mark on bricks and mortar alone.

On his watch, 34 Fighting Illini programs captured Big Ten titles. Men's basketball was the 2005 national runner-up. The football team made six bowl appearances.

Yet wins and losses also don't give the full measure of Guenther's accomplishments in his years at the helm of the Division of Intercollegiate Athletics. His leadership put DIA on sound financial footing, emphasized achievements by athletes in the classroom as well as on the playing field, and established a culture that valued integrity. Above all, Guenther's career was driven by a deep passion for his Alma Mater, a relationship stretching back



Guenther

to 1963, when he arrived as a physical education major and football recruit from Elmhurst.

Leadership from the top

Northwestern Athletics Director **Jim Phillips '90 AHS** sees Illinois' current reputation as a reflection of Guenther, whom he calls the "quintessential athletics director."

"It's not surprising that during his tenure, the department had impeccable character and values," Phillips said. "That leadership starts at the top."

Under Guenther, DIA became widely known for conducting its business the right way. His philosophy: "We represent the University of Illinois. We're going to do it the way it's supposed to be done."

Guenther inherited a department whose image was dinged by past NCAA rules violations; upon his arrival as AD, he made burnishing its tarnished reputation a top priority. "I loved the University," he said. "I thought ... we could be a real asset to [it], and the integrity component was one of the first things we had to address."

The department's finances were another challenge the former offensive lineman had to tackle.

Early on, Guenther made the difficult decision to eliminate fencing and men's swimming and diving, allowing him to balance the budget by his third year as director and, in turn, attract donors.

During Guenther's tenure, the department secured commitments of more than \$300 million for facilities, increased endowments from \$2 million to \$40 million as of 2011, and more than tripled its annual fund – from \$2.4 mil-

lion to approximately \$8 million. And it was this financial security that made it possible for him to embark on the building projects that represent his most visible accomplishments.

Guenther believes the upgrades were essential for recruiting more consistently and winning in the conference and nationwide.

"Facilities don't win championships, but you have to have facilities that compete nationally," Guenther said.

During 21 seasons at Illinois, head basketball coach Lou Henson had to move practices around from Huff Hall to local schools because the team lacked dedicated practice space.

To address that problem, the department opened the Ubben Basketball Complex in 1998.

"[Guenther] kind of thought out of the box," current coach Bruce Weber said. "We were one of the first basketball programs in the country to have a basketball practice facility."

Sometimes criticized for up-and-down results on the gridiron, Guenther upgraded training facilities at Memorial Stadium and completed the Irwin Indoor Practice Facility in 2000, improvements that he says put the team in a more competitive position for the future.

“Up until we got started on the facilities part of it, I think the expectations of the football program were almost too high for what they had,” he said. “This is the first time that I think the football staff has all of what it needs to get the job done.”

Head soccer coach Janet Rayfield said she appreciates the balance and loyalty Guenther brought to all 19 varsity sports the University offers.

“Despite being a football player himself, he didn’t show any bias,” she said. “He wanted to give myself and the other coaches of women’s sports here the resources [we] needed to be successful, the same way he wanted to give the football team the resources it needed to be successful,” she said.

Protecting the student-athlete

As the football team’s MVP and the University’s outstanding senior in physical education in 1966, Guenther understood the importance of both halves of the phrase “student-athlete.”

“I was very, very fortunate to have a wonderful experience, both athletically and academically,” he said.

But ensuring that current athletes enjoy the same well-balanced experience is becoming increasingly difficult. “The demand on the kids’ [schedules] is unbelievable,” Guenther said. “There’s very little time just to be a student any longer.”

To aid in that cause, the Irwin Academic Services Center opened in 1997 to provide student-athletes with study space, tutoring and other support to succeed in the classroom.

“I’ve been at a lot of schools,” Weber said. “Not many of them have [a center like] that, which helps with the success of academics here.”

Since 1998, Illinois student-athletes have an overall graduation success rate of 87 percent. For classes that entered from 2000 to 2003, eight athletics programs had 100 percent graduation rates, and 14 others had rates exceeding the national average for their sport.

By comparison, the graduation rate

New DIA Leader Selected



Thomas

Cary Frye/UI Sports Information Photo

Mike Thomas has been named the new director of the Division of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Illinois, heading a program with 19 varsity sports, 200 full-time employees and a \$67 million budget. He had previously served in a similar post for six years at the University of Cincinnati, where he is credited with boosting the athletics program to national prominence, tripling the program’s donor base and promoting academic success among its athletes. “I’m deeply honored and excited to be able to lead the Fighting Illini,”

said Thomas, 51, who assumed his new post at Illinois on Aug. 29, pending approval by the UI Board of Trustees. More information about Thomas will appear in the Winter 2011 issue of *Illinois Alumni*.

for all students entering in 2004 – athletes and non-athletes alike – was 84 percent.

And Guenther put his money where his mouth is in bolstering the excellence of a UI education. He served on the Library Campaign Steering Committee in the 2000s and helped DIA donate \$1 million to the venerable Main Library, one of the largest among public universities in the nation.

‘A bit of statesman in him’

While his Illinois loyalty runs deep, Guenther is regarded as a great colleague of fellow Big Ten athletics directors.

“He had a bit of statesman in him,” said Purdue’s Morgan Burke. “He was very, very good at pulling different constituencies together and coming to a consensus everyone could agree on.

“He has a grand sense of humor. He has a way of taking tense moments and getting people to decompress.”

The decision to retire didn’t come easily for Guenther, but recent changes in University hierarchy made it seem like the right moment.

“To build a new relationship takes time,” he said. “I felt it would be the right thing for the new administration to have [its] own person.”

While he doesn’t plan to be full-time retired, his new life will take some getting used to.

“It already seems weird,” Guenther

said. In late July, the Big Ten held its football kickoff luncheon in Chicago. It was the first in two decades he didn’t attend.

“The University of Illinois has been, for the most part, my entire career,” Guenther said. “It’s a great, great institution.”

– Dan Petrella

Petrella '06 MEDIA, '06 LAS, MS '10 MEDIA, is a freelance journalist in Urbana.



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UI Sports Information Photo

Former Illini Stars Come Out To Play

Many of the top Illinois men’s basketball players from the last two decades took the Assembly Hall floor once again Aug. 6 for a Fighting Illini Alumni Basketball Game. View a photo gallery of some of your favorites.

www.fightingillini.com/view.gal?id=99050