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## From AHS to the SEC

By Dan Friedell / Special to The Citizen



### **Photo provided**

*Greg Sankey stands in front of the Cotton Bowl stadium in Dallas last week. The Auburn native is there to represent the Southeastern Conference.*

All Greg Sankey ever wanted to do was teach and coach basketball at a high school in upstate New York.

That's what he thought about while working as a lifeguard at the Owasco Yacht Club during his college years.

Twenty years later, instead of teaching teenagers how to box out, he's an associate commissioner with the Southeastern Conference, one of the most powerful Division I athletic conferences in the country, where he teaches the 12 member schools how to stay out of trouble with the NCAA.

Not bad for a guy who was an assistant coach for the Maroons' boys basketball team in the mid-1980s.

"It was the 1986-87 season, the year after they were really good," the Birmingham, Ala. resident said by phone from Dallas, where he was representing the conference during the week leading up to Monday's Cotton Bowl - which pits the SEC's University of Alabama against the Big-12's Texas Tech.

Sankey earned his associate's degree from Cayuga Community College, his bachelor's degree from Cortland State, and while working as the director of intramural sports at Utica College, he earned his master's degree from Syracuse University.

He only accepted the job in Utica because he wasn't offered a teaching job after graduating from Cortland. If he had started teaching, he probably wouldn't have left the Auburn area (his wife, Cathy is from Skaneateles, and Sankey's parents still live in Auburn); and he might never have attended an NCAA men's basketball Final Four. He's now seen 13 straight finals.

"I've joked that there's probably somebody living in Central New York whose goal was to be involved in conference administration and somehow our paths got crossed," Sankey said. "I ended up living in Dallas and then working for the SEC, and there's probably somebody coaching the basketball team that had been assigned to me at some point, but we just intersected."

The 41-year-old's rise through the ranks of college athletics administration hasn't been a fluke.

Tynes Hildebrand, the former Director of Athletics at Northwestern State University, in Natchitoches, La., hired Sankey as the university's compliance director after he completed a one-year internship in the school's athletic department. The internship had Sankey doing everything from selling tickets to sweeping the basketball court.

Hildebrand said Sankey was always good at anticipating and solving problems.

"That's what made him so good at NCAA compliance," he said.

He was also good at impersonating Spider Man, if necessary.

Hildebrand remembered when Sankey, who was also the golf coach, took a recruit

up to the football stadium's press box to see the view from the highest point on campus.

"Lo-and-behold, the elevator stops between floors," Hildebrand said. "He crawled out of the top of that elevator, climbed up to the next level, and was able to pry open the door. I've kidded him a lot about that, because with a recruit, that had to be embarrassing. Not only that,

but it was dangerous.”

The recruit ultimately chose not to attend Northwestern State despite Sankey's extraction efforts.

Sankey left Northwestern State in 1992 for the Dallas-based Southland Conference, where he continued to work on compliance issues and also helped promote the NCAA Division I-AA football playoffs to networks like ESPN. He ultimately became the conference's commissioner in 1996 before moving to the SEC in 2002.

While at the Southland Conference, one thing Sankey did was help put on the conference's basketball tournaments. Once, while he and colleague Sue Donohoe were putting the finishing touches on the venue, Sankey pulled out a ladder.

“And he's up there cleaning the backboard,” said Donohoe, who now runs the Division I women's basketball tournament for the NCAA. “That's just kind of him. He saw something and said, 'that needs to be done.' So there was the commissioner of our conference, wearing a suit, cleaning the backboard a couple of hours before the game.”

Hildebrand's well-rounded internship program prepared Sankey for the future.

“I've seen him at a baseball or football game,” Donohoe said. “And he can relate to both a student trainer and the president of the university.”

While those anecdotes spotlight Sankey's humility and ability to think on his feet, he has been involved in serious work during his career.

When Sankey - who said his career's outstanding memory so far was meeting legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden at the 2001 Final Four - was hired by the SEC, eight of the conference's schools were either on probation or facing allegations from the NCAA.

In 2002, the conference created a task force whose goal was to have all of its schools probation-free by 2008.

“Unless something happens tonight,” Sankey said, “we're on track for that.”

While South Carolina, Auburn, Alabama, Mississippi State, Kentucky, Arkansas and Georgia are all still facing some degree of probation, Sankey said there have not been any new allegations.

“I've been happy to help change some of the culture relative to avoiding those NCAA problems, and that's going to be a daily effort,” Sankey said. “I think we've made progress because we don't have folks going through the infractions process now”and we've worked to prevent those problems from happening again.“

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