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Penguins public relations speaker discusses hockey, branding

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Students filled Stouffer Hall's Beard Auditorium Monday night for the Public Relations Student Society of America's sponsored speaker: a public relations representative from the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Tom McMillan, vice president of communications for the Pittsburgh Penguins, is a Point Park graduate. Now in his 15th season with the Penguins, McMillan has been through the National Hockey League lockout as well as the relocation to the new arena.

"We have a waiting list of 8,000, and we have sold out every game for four and half years, but that doesn't mean we can give up," McMillan said.

The 2003-2004 NHL lockout began Sept. 16, 2004. For the next 310 days that made up the 88th NHL season, the league did not play a single game. The entire season was canceled over a labor dispute. McMillan referred to the lockout as "torture," and he didn't know if there were going to be any more games.

The loss of the 2003-2004 season meant that there were no results on which to base the order of the 2005 entry draft. In July, the league settled on a lottery system in which all teams had a chance at first pick.

"Friday at 3 o'clock they closed the lockout," said McMillan. "Friday at 4 o'clock, we won the lottery and drafted Sidney Crosby. The world changed."

After the changes and a year and a half of research to find their "Pittsburgh blue-collar mantra," the Pens found their niche.

"Our audience became very young," McMillan said. "We started the texting updates, selling the student rush tickets, and suddenly we became involved in social media."



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Tom McMillan, vice president of communications for the Pittsburgh Penguins, discussed the challenge of keeping fans interested

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While no two days at his job are alike, McMillan said that he loves his job.

McMillan explained that just how there are different styles of teams, and how not everyone has a "Crosby," there are also different styles of writing, and you may not be good at every one of them.

"Sometimes not doing well is extremely motivating," he said.

"You should always come up with ideas," he added. "You can't be afraid of bad ideas."

McMillan also talked about how the Pens franchise is in charge of the team's brand and not just their logo.

"A brand is what you project," McMillan said, "what you want people to think of you."

Their brand is focused on finding and keeping the casual sports fans interested in the sport of hockey, certain players and the Winter Classic, among other things.

"When you're the NHL, and not as popular as the NFL or the NBA, you have to try certain things," he said.

One of those certain things was reaching out to the sports crowd, which was the Penguins' main goal. This happened when the NHL and HBO announced their partnership in a behind the scenes "24/7" film access of the Penguins.

McMillan was told by one of the Pens players that, "I wonder if we are going to look on TV like we think we look."

McMillan added that players' commentary is what they need to work on.

"This isn't all black and white," he said. "You're always learning. You can never master it."

Ashley Pomper (junior, journalism) agreed with McMillan and will take his advice.

"He told us we need to try everything and get experience," she said. "He took the time to answer everyone's questions fully. I think he left everyone more interested in PR and in his position."

"As a Pens fan, I at times become ignorant to all of the people that make their franchise as successful as they are," Casey Contres (senior, journalism) said. "Sid and Malkin deserve a lot of credit, but behind the scenes people like Mr. McMillan cannot be overlooked."

"In sports, every day is a new page," Nicole Bolden (junior, journalism) said. "I thought it was interesting how he works for the team, and he has only sat down to watch six minutes of a game because he is running around doing so many things. That is so exciting to me."

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