

## **CougsFirst!**

Courtesy: Washington State Athletics

Release: 03/26/2013

**March 26, 2013**

**By Jason Krump**

Several years ago, Jack Thompson was at the Los Angeles Coliseum to see his son, Tony, play for the Washington State Cougars against USC.

It was the first time Thompson, the Cougar quarterback great from 1975-78, had been back to the iconic stadium since his playing days, and he was struck by more than just the setting.

Outside the coliseum, he noticed a large number of USC exhibitor and vendor booths, and the fans who were gravitating toward them.

"I was blown away by it," Thompson recalls.

And he had an epiphany.

Though he was seeing the great support demonstrated by USC fans, Thompson knew it didn't match what WSU offers.

"They got nothing on us," he remembers thinking. "I'm outside the Coliseum thinking there's no way they love their school the way we love our school."

Though Robbie Tobeck played for the Cougar Football team in a different era than Thompson, from 1991-93, he shares the same bond and love that Thompson has for WSU.

"Cougar alumni are some of the most loyal alumni in the country," says Tobeck, who played for the Atlanta Falcons and Seattle Seahawks during a 14-year NFL career. "When I was playing in Atlanta people would say 'Go Cougs!' to me. When I came back home and was playing for the Seahawks, in the middle of our Super Bowl run, more people would come up to me and say 'Go Cougs!' rather than 'Go Hawks!'"

And even Tobeck would get in the act.

He remembers driving in downtown Tampa, Fla., when without warning, he spotted a car with a Cougar license plate.

Diverting from his original destination, Tobeck followed the car for a few blocks.

"Just to say hello to him," Tobeck recalls.

It's that unique connection Cougars have with fellow Cougars that sparked a thought in the minds of Thompson and Tobeck.



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*- Jack Thompson*



During the spring of 2011, the two met with fellow Cougar supporters - Glenn Osterhout, **Kyle Basler**, Mike Bernard and Paul Dent - for lunch one day in Seattle.

During that lunch, the group came up with an idea.

"Let's start something," Thompson remembers saying at the lunch. "A business network for WSU Alumni and friends"

What started that day is CougsFirst!, which Thompson, Tobeck, Osterhout, Basler, Bernard, Dent, and recently added Mike Politeo describe as a volunteer-driven initiative dedicated to having all WSU alumni think "CougsFirst!" whenever and wherever they purchase a product or service.

"Think CougsFirst!," Thompson says. "It's simple and straightforward.

"And very intentional," Thompson adds. "We're encouraging all Cougs, if you're looking for a product or service, to think CougsFirst!"



Jack Thompson

"We need to capitalize on this connection Cougars have with each other, and this is the best way we found to do it," Tobeck adds.

The mission, says Thompson, is twofold.

"Number one, we want to change the culture," he explains. "We're not saying to guarantee your business to a Coug, but at least have them in the decision-making process.

"Secondly, for those who manage a business, give us a call and get involved."

"We're asking that you get involved," echoes Tobeck, who is co-owner with Paul Dent of Bellevue-based Griffin MacLean Insurance. "It benefits the alumni and the university because it gets Cougars engaged, gets them involved."

And by becoming involved with Cougar businesses, Thompson and Tobeck are

confident it will increase the likelihood of Cougars becoming involved with their alma mater.

"We want to give back to the Cougar business community," says Thompson. "When businesses win, it enhances our degrees from Washington State University, and when business is generated, Cougars are more likely to turn around and give back to their school, which in my case is the **Cougar Athletic Fund** and the College of Business."



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"For me, I'm a football player so that is near and dear to my heart," adds Tobeck. "It could be the College of Business, it could be the College of Veterinary Medicine. We're just asking that you think about Cougs when you're doing business and you give back to the university in whatever capacity you can."

With the assistance of Thompson's employer, Sterling Bank, serving as primary sponsor, CougsFirst! launched in June 2011.

"Sterling Bank has been a major player from the start," Thompson, VP of Private Banking, said. "They stepped up when it was a total concept and have been supportive ever since."

And support has been shown for CougsFirst! by full attendance at several social

gatherings for Seattle-area business owners since the movement began.

That reach will expand when the first major event for CougsFirst! takes place, April 17, with a trade show at the Hyatt Regency in Bellevue.

Much like what Thompson saw outside the L.A. Coliseum that day, the Hyatt Regency will feature exhibitor and vendor booths from nearly 40 Cougar businesses and service organizations.

In addition, the show will feature WSU and NFL great Drew Bledsoe, who will provide the keynote address and display wines from his Doubleback Winery.

"This is groundbreaking," says Thompson. "We're encouraging Cougs from all over the state to come and have a good time, while at the same time learn about all the Cougs who are out there in the business and service world."

Thompson and Tobeck stress that April's trade show is not designed to be a one-time only event.

"I want this to take on a life of its own and become a real asset to the university and to our alumni," said Tobeck. "I'd like to see CougsFirst! events and chapters established in other cities. We have a lot of alumni in the Portland and Vancouver area, Spokane, California and many other places."

And no matter where future CougsFirst! Events take place, the common thread will be the same, as it is for all Cougars, regardless of the setting.

That connection to WSU and Pullman.

"We received a world-class education at Washington State University," Thompson states. "When you leave, why wouldn't you want to deal with world-class people who went to the same school?"

"We all went to WSU because it's a terrific college town and it creates a special bond," Thompson adds. "That's what fuels the CougsFirst! movement. Let's dig a little deeper because we all have the same background and value similar things. There are a lot of very successful Cougs in the business world. We just need to find them."

Source: <http://www.wsucougars.com/ViewArticle.dbml?ATCLID=207872711>