

A Dream Job Coming to Life!



Jay Darden

Building a Program from Scratch

BY BILL SHEEHAN

Jay Darden was born and raised in Portland, Oregon, so it's fitting he's become a trailblazer. Hired in May as the Cal State Fullerton Athletic Department's inaugural assistant athletic director of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Darden has been given a free hand to develop a program that will serve the sports administrators, coaches and student-athletes. He is believed to be one of the nation's first DEI directors dedicated solely to intercollegiate athletics.

With no templates to guide him, Darden is truly building the program from scratch. "I'll be honest. Every day has been a challenge. But this is also a great opportunity," said Darden, who was a three-year starting cornerback for Division 2 Western Oregon University. "I can lay the groundwork and say that I created a DEI program at a Division 1 school.

Darden, whose full name is Jeff Darden II, arrived at Fullerton after a 26-month stint as a senior academic advisor at Cal State San Marcos. He has spent the summer meeting with Titan administrators and coaches and learning the ins and outs of campus life.

He formed a DEI committee to assist him. The committee held a Zoom meeting this month to discuss the establishment of best practices, mission goals and principles as well as setting up measured outcomes.

The panel also discussed launching activities such as having guest speakers, panel discussions and student mixers where student-athletes from across Titan Athletics could exchange thoughts and ideas.

Darden also plans to hold training sessions three times a semester for coaches and athletics staff members. "We really want to do everything in a meaningful way," said Darden. "Students today are much more comfortable voicing their opinions. Parents and coaches are encouraging students to speak out more, especially when it concerns their mental health. We want to decrease any sense of isolation that might exist among student-athletes."

Darden's father, Jeff, said his son's life experiences give him an enhanced perspective on what a DEI job is all about. "Jay is very much a people person who is humorous and very easy to get along with. He has a deep passion for athletics as well as helping athletes to ensure they have the academic background they need for post-school jobs."

Darden's life journey has had many twists and turns. Born to teen-age parents, Darden and his three younger siblings – two sisters and a brother -- were primarily raised by their father Jeff and their paternal grandmother Lucinda Baldwin. "My father was in the Army, and I lived in Hawaii for two years as a kid before we moved to Portland," he said.

Darden hopes his experience as a DEI director will be step toward his longtime goal of becoming a college athletic director. "Right now, I'm focused on DEI. But if I work hard, there might be an opening in the AD lane for me down the line."

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