The Minnesota Star Tribune
SPORTS
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2025 • SECTION C

SPORTSPERSON OF THE YEAR

Esten leads St. Thomas to new era

With his intelligent and creative vision, athletic director led St. Thomas' unprecedented leap into Division I.

Story by CHIP SCOGGINS • Photo by CARLOS GONZALEZ • The Minnesota Star Tribune

The Gophers opened their new on-campus football stadium on a mid-September evening in 2009. As an administrator in the athletic department, Phil Esten had served as point person for all facets of the stadium's construction.

Esten drove home that night thinking less about the game's final score or the pomp and circumstance surrounding the venue's opening, and more about the legacy created for generations to come.

"I remember thinking, 'That was a lot. I'm not sure I can do something like that again,'" Esten recalled, pausing a beat. "Here we are."

He chuckled at the irony.

A decade and a half later, Esten is sitting courtside at the Lee and Penny Anderson Arena, the $183 million facility and crown jewel symbol of St. Thomas' unprecedented leap into Division I athletics.

Historically, the NCAA's reclassifying process from Division III to Division I mandated a 12-year window. St. Thomas did it in four years, becoming the first institution to make the jump directly without a stop in between.

That expedited passage required leadership that is equal parts ambitious, patient, nimble and creative. The Tommies leaned on the stewardship of an athletic director who once played catcher on their baseball team and washed dishes and served sandwiches as a student worker in the campus cafeteria.

Esten's steady hand in guiding St. Thomas athletics into a new era has made him the Minnesota Star Tribune's 2025 Sportsperson of the Year.

SEE ESTEN ON C2 »

After growing the St. Thomas into a powerhouse Division III program, athletic director Phil Esten guided the school through a complicated but successful transition into Division I.

Decker is dusting off her skates as coach

LA VELLE E. NEAL III
Columnist

The United States women's hockey team, buttressed with several members of the Frost, throttled Canada in a four-game sweep of the rivalry series between the teams that ended on Dec. 13.

The remaining Frost players were working out at Tria Rink in St. Paul, waiting for the Professional Women's Hockey League season to resume. Brianna Decker has been right there with them.

I swung by a couple recent practices. And it was great to see Decker on skates again.

The hockey legend is just 34 and possibly could have been part of the domination of Canada. But her career took a turn, and now the former forward is in her first year as a member of the Frost coaching staff. She is working with coach Ken Klee, a relationship that goes back to 2015 and '16 when he coached

SEE NEAL ON C7 »

Launch pad for NHL stars comes to town

By SARAH MCLELLAN
The Minnesota Star Tribune

The 11-day World Junior Championship begins with games at Mariucci and Grand Casino Arena.

Lakeville's Jake Oettinger helped the U.S. take home bronze at the 2018 World Junior Championship, outdoors in Buffalo, N.Y.

Photo by MARK BLINCH • The Associated Press

Playing in a hostile environment was all that came to mind for a young Brock Faber when he pictured what the World Junior Championship would be like.

But when the Wild defenseman finally made it to the tournament, the animosity he expected didn't come from a sold-out crowd ... because there wasn't one.

"It was so weird," Faber said.

Despite competing in Canada in what should have been a tense environment for Team USA against its top rival, the arena in Edmonton was almost empty due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"You score a goal and nothing seems to happen," said Wild right wing Matt Boldy, who was on the 2021 U.S. roster alongside Faber.

When the Americans captured gold by shutting out the Canadians 2-0, there wasn't an outcry, only the sound

SEE JUNIORS ON C7 »

Unsung Wilson has stepped up in big way

CHIP SCOGGINS
Columnist

The Vikings held an eight-point lead late in the fourth quarter Sunday night. The Dallas Cowboys were driving for a potential touchdown that could lead to tying the score.

The ball sat at the Vikings 45-yard line at AT&T Stadium, fourth-and-7 with 5½ minutes left. Dallas made the now-or-never decision to go for it.

Quarterback Dak Prescott threw a checkdown pass to running back Malik Davis, who was belted by a defender immediately just short of the first-down marker, a play that preserved a Vikings win.

Linebacker Eric Wilson made that drive-stalling tackle because of course he did.

He's been an unsung star of the Vikings defense all season.

"You can always count on him to be sound with his assignment," fellow linebacker Blake Cashman said.

SEE SCOGGINS ON C5 »

Tommies reach new heights under Esten

« ESTEN FROM C1

"I really think he was the perfect person at the perfect time at the perfect school," longtime men's basketball coach Johnny Tauer said. "I don't think I can overstate how powerful his leadership has been throughout this whole process."

Since moving to Division I in 2021, the athletic department has nearly tripled its donor base and netted more than $160 million in fundraising. That figure includes a $75 million gift from Lee and Penny Anderson for the construction of the dual-purpose basketball and hockey arena. At the time, their donation represented the ninth-largest gift in college athletics history.

St. Thomas teams are eligible to compete in D-I postseason tournaments for the first time this school year after Esten and Summit League leaders successfully petitioned the NCAA to change the provisional waiting period for reclassification, reducing it by one year.

The Tommies volleyball team earned an inaugural trip to the NCAA tournament, losing to No. 23 Iowa State in five sets in the first round Dec. 5. The men's basketball team was picked to win the Summit League in its preseason poll.

The transition has created ripple effects outside of competition. In each of the past four years, 25% or more of donors to the athletic department have been first-time donors to the university. That equates to athletics attracting more than 1,000 new donors to the school.

University President Rob Vischer describes visibility in higher education as "oxygen" and noted the move to D-I has helped expand the school's name recognition nationally, attract students and engage alumni who might not have otherwise invested emotionally or financially.

Vischer credits Esten's background as a St. Thomas student and experience in major college athletics as essential components in navigating this new adventure.

"He knows the big picture and where the path can go and how to do it in a world-class way," Vischer said.

Esten, 53, nearly chose a different path both as a student and professional.

A native of La Crosse, Wis., he originally committed to play baseball for Wisconsin, but then the Badgers dropped their program. He pivoted to St. Thomas and played there until graduating in 1995. He worked in the dining hall to help pay tuition.

His career in athletic administration included stops at Ohio State, Minnesota, Cal and Penn State. Esten was a finalist for several Division I AD openings before former St. Thomas President Julie Sullivan called to pitch a homecoming for him, wife Dani and their three children.

Esten thanked Sullivan, but decided to stay at Penn State with the goal of becoming a Division I athletic director. Sullivan called again a few weeks later and explained the growing discontent within the MIAC aimed at St. Thomas.

Esten took the job with no guarantees about the school's athletic future.

"It was clear at the time that there wasn't a path directly from Division III to Division I," Esten said. "If that was something we wanted to do, we were going to have to figure out a plan that nobody had ever endeavored before."

He arrived in January 2019 and learned within days that St. Thomas' future in the MIAC was tenuous. A few months later, the conference formally asked the school to find a new home. St. Thomas considered options in all divisions before deciding to pursue permission from the NCAA to jump directly to Division I.

That choice brought messy complications. Most of the sports programs joined the Summit League. Football moved to the Pioneer League, while men's and women's hockey became members of the CCHA and WCHA, respectively. Esten also finalized an awkward divorce from the MIAC after 99 years.

"He was juggling five different conferences for two years," said Pat Ryan, former chair of the school's board of trustees. "It is just crazy. But he immediately surrounded himself with people that were very capable and started putting the pieces together."

The puzzle was complicated. Esten's message to his department was direct and concise. Don't cut corners. Focus on building culture. Look at the process through a long lens.

The athletic department had grown into a powerhouse Division III program. Suddenly, the Tommies were facing teams with scholarship athletes. They went from big fish to small fish overnight.

"I've seen time and time again that culture pulls success and not the other way around," Esten said. "It was important to me that our coaches felt permission to make decisions that might ultimately lead to a loss or two but was there to build culture long term."

Comforting words, but coaches don't take losing well. Their careers hinge on their record.

Tauer is a national championship coach who maintained a premier program in Division III, winning 81% of his games in 10 seasons.

His team went 10-20 its first Division I season, which included a 12-game losing streak.

Tauer, who graduated from St. Thomas the same year as Esten, spent a lot of time talking to his boss after losses.

"Phil might have been my pseudo therapist," Tauer said, laughing. "He would oftentimes talk me down when I was really frustrated or down about the outcomes."

Esten's message never wavered. He stressed patience and perspective, though the competitor inside him didn't enjoy losing either.

"My wife would say all the time, 'It's not losing, it's learning,'" he said.

Tauer noted that, metaphorically, he was never asked to run a four-minute mile. As scholarship numbers increased incrementally on rosters, Tommies programs became more competitive.

Tauer's team won 19 games its second season in Division I, then 20, then 24.

The football team won the non-scholarship Pioneer League championship in its second season. The baseball team has won back-to-back Summit League regular-season titles. The softball team won the conference championship this past season, making St. Thomas the first school in Summit League history to win the conference softball and baseball titles in the same year.

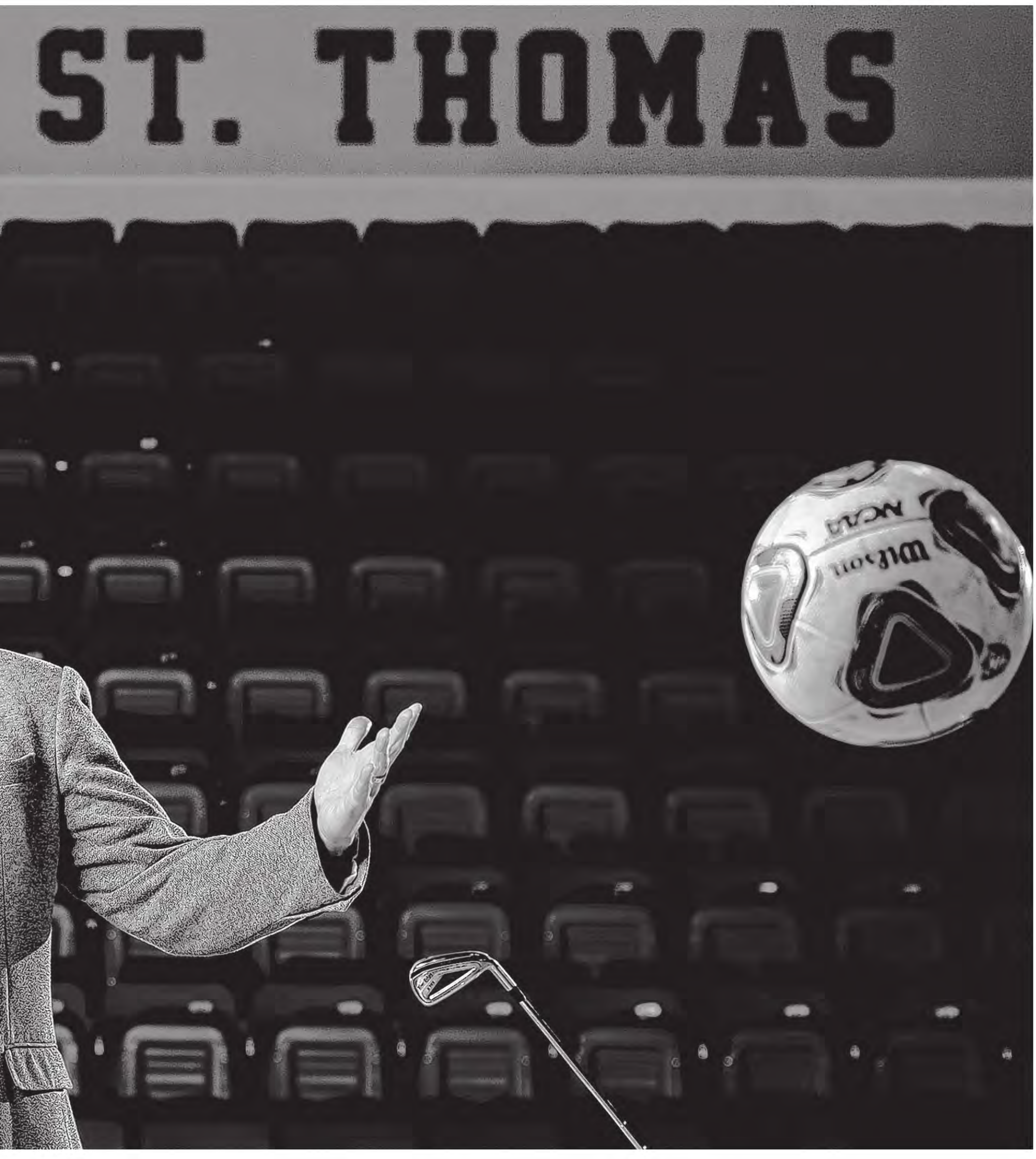
Both men's basketball and men's hockey advanced to their respective league championship games last season.

That success has fueled an increase in brand exposure and fan engagement. The Tommies' social media following has increased by more than 130% since their transition to Division I.

A surge in season ticket accounts – 140% growth in men's basketball, 190% in men's hockey in the past year – coincided with the opening of Lee and Penny Anderson Arena.

The four-year provisional window that prevented the Tommies from participating in NCAA postseason tournaments might have felt like an eternity, but Esten found some positives.

"None of our coaches were accustomed to losing," he said. "Long term, we can't lose regularly. We keep score for a reason. But when the stakes aren't necessarily, 'Win and go to the tournament,' it does make it easier to lean into culture."



The athletic department's infrastructure changed alongside what was taking place with its sports programs. Esten inherited 33 full-time employees. That number now stands at 115.

Enhancements were necessary in a multitude of areas, including fundraising, oversight, marketing and athlete support.

"Phil's pitch to us was to be part of something that nobody has ever done before," said Ben Fraser, a senior administrator who joined the staff in 2020 to oversee development and fundraising, "and to put your mark on an institution and really build something from the ground up."

Colleagues describe Esten's leadership style as intelligent, no-nonsense and even-tempered. He uses the term "comprehensive excellence" frequently when outlining expectations.

"He's led with grace but also tenacity as well," said Jodee Kozlak, current chair of the board of trustees. "It's kind of a nuanced approach. But he put amazing guardrails in place."

Though newbies to D-I, the Tommies made the leap with eyes open. Winning matters to the bottom line. Fundraising is paramount. Investing in facility upgrades commensurate with Division I standards was non-negotiable.

Vischer noted that increased visibility benefits the entire university – "A rising tide lifts all boats," he said – but it also requires appropriate perspective.

"We're not trying to be Ohio State," Vischer said. "We're trying to be St. Thomas."

What this version looks like in, say, five years, 10 years or 30 years is to be determined. But just as he did back in 2009 after watching the Gophers football stadium come to fruition, Esten has thought a lot about the legacy tied to his current endeavor. Not his own legacy, but the university's.

"That's something that plays on repeat in the back of your mind as you go through this," he said.

Something else does, too. The feeling of: What's next? Esten said he's always been steered professionally by that mentality. Start a project, finish it and move on to the next.

"What's next, what's next, what's next?" he said of the internal motivation to keep growing. "We've done that for the last five or six years. What's next is, now let's take advantage of all the things that we've done."

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How Sportsperson of the Year is chosen

Candidates are nominated by the Minnesota Star Tribune sports department. A selection committee of staff members debates the nominees and votes on the final choice.

Phil Esten, top, led St. Thomas up to Division I in just four years. Investing in facility upgrades, left, to meet the new standards was non-negotiable. In the first year of postseason eligibility, the men's basketball team, above, was picked to win the Summit League in its preseason poll, and the volleyball team, middle, earned an inaugural trip to the NCAA tournament.

Photos by CARLOS GONZALEZ (top), ALEX KORMANN and RENÉE JONES SCHNEIDER • The Minnesota Star Tribune

PAST WINNERS

2024, Napheesa Collier: The Lynx star made an impact across women's basketball, winning a gold medal, leading her team to the WNBA Finals and co-founding Unrivaled, a new 3-on-3 league.

2023, Jessie Diggins: The former Olympic gold medalist from Afton was the first American to collect 16 World Cup victories and also the first to win a world title in an individual cross-country ski race.

2022, Justin Jefferson: The third-year Vikings receiver developed into a bona fide superstar, launching himself into record books and imaginations with a combination of grit, grace and the Griddy.

2021, Suni Lee: The gymnast from St. Paul, the first Hmong American to make an Olympic team, came home from Tokyo with three medals, including a gold for winning the all-around competition.

2020, Eric Kendricks: The All-Pro Vikings linebacker turned his private work into public activism after the killing of George Floyd.

2019, Nelson Cruz: The veteran slugger, at age 39, brought clout to the Twins on the field and in the clubhouse, leading the Bomba Squad to 101 wins and a major league record 307 home runs, including 41 of his own.

2018, Maggie Nichols: The Little Canada native dominated the NCAA gymnastics championships as Oklahoma's star — three months after courageously revealing herself as "Athlete A," the first source in the USA Gymnastics sexual-abuse scandal.

2017, Cheryl Reeve: The coach behind the united, thoughtful and powerful Lynx led the franchise to its fourth WNBA title in seven years.

2016, Jeff Hintz: As the Ryder Cup tournament director at Hazeltine National, he organized one of the greatest sporting events in Minnesota history.

2015, Maya Moore: She hit a Game 3 buzzer-beater in the WNBA Finals, and many more big shots in the playoffs, to lead the Lynx to their third championship.

2014, Mike Grant: The veteran Eden Prairie football coach won his fourth consecutive state title and 10th overall.

2013, Gophers women's hockey: The team produced a 41-0 record, an NCAA championship and a 62-game winning streak over two seasons.

2012, Adrian Peterson: He rushed for 2,097 yards, second-most in NFL history, and was named the league's MVP, leading the Vikings to a 10-6 regular-season record and their first playoff berth in three years.

2011, Seimone Augustus: After two years of misfortune, the Lynx star dug deep and inspired her team to a WNBA title.

2010, Earl Santee: The architect of Target Field turned an urban parking lot into the "best ballpark in America."

2009, Brett Favre: The future Hall of Famer led the Vikings to a 12-4 regular season and an appearance in the NFC title game. At age 40, Favre completed 68% of his passes.

2008, Lindsey Vonn: She became the most successful downhill skier in U.S. history and the first American woman in 25 years to win the World Cup overall title.

2007, Adrian Peterson: The Vikings rookie set the single-game rushing record with 296 yards in his eighth game.

2006, Twins organization: A playoff team with a Cy Young Award winner (Johan Santana), an MVP (Justin Morneau) and a batting champion (Joe Mauer) also got approval for a stadium.

2005, Greg Eslinger: The All-America center and all-time Gophers great won the Outland Trophy, given to the country's best interior lineman.

2004, Lindsay Whalen: She was the driving force behind the Gophers women's basketball program reaching the Final Four.

2003, John Gagliardi: The St. John's legend earned his 409th victory on Nov. 8, 2003, becoming college football's winningest coach, and his team won the NCAA Division III title.

2002, Harry Crump: Hennepin County judge issued a restraining order that kept the Twins out of MLB's contraction plans.

2001, Joe Mauer: The three-sport star at Cretin-Derham Hall was one of the state's all-time great high school athletes before he put on a Twins uniform.

2000, Jac Sperling: The Wild's chief executive led the NHL back to Minnesota and started the rally to build the team's arena.

1999, Glen Mason: The Gophers' most successful football season in three decades (culminating with a Sun Bowl matchup against Oregon) earned him Big Ten Coach of the Year honors.

1998, Randall Cunningham: Out of football before joining the Vikings as a backup quarterback, he led the team to a 15-1 regular season at age 35.