

Fans Pow Wow Online

Gene Williams started Warchant.com in 1994 and he's been on top ever since Fans Pow Wow at Warchant.com Gene Williams' 'Nice Little Hobby' Grows into THE Online Source for FSU Football

By Scott Carter

On a steamy morning in the middle of summer and with Florida State University's season-opening game against hated rival Miami still more than two months away, it felt like the middle of football season if you stepped into the huddle at Warchant.com.

The message boards on the popular Web site devoted to covering Florida State sports buzzed with football fever:

Serious question: Who will be our go-to receiver this year?

My dream about the UM game!!

Poll: Which autograph will you get on Fan Day?

Dot Com . . . Marcus Sims update?

Questions and comments such as these jam Warchant's busy message boards with more traffic than Tennessee Street at rush hour. The message boards provide a meeting place where diehard Seminole fans converge to discuss everything from the latest blue-chip recruit to how much senior linebacker Dekoda Watson is bench-pressing these days.

The man who started all this madness is Warchant founder and owner Gene Williams, a 1988 graduate of FSU and a former Tallahassee attorney. To those Warchant warriors who can't wait for his next post, the 43-year-old Williams is known simply as Dot Com, a nickname that originated early in Williams' then-crazy idea of creating a Web site to cover FSU sports.

While most considered the idea more loony than wearing a Tim Tebow jersey around Tallahassee, some paid attention immediately, providing Williams with the incentive to continue what his wife, Stacy, considered a "nice little hobby" when Williams first dabbled with the concept in 1994.

One of Williams' biggest supporters early on was sports-talk radio host Rick Ballou. Prior to working for station 1010 XL in Jacksonville, Ballou was a popular on-air personality in Tallahassee, often filling his show by talking FSU football. Williams was a frequent caller, phoning in mostly to talk about the Seminoles' latest recruiting efforts and to plug that little hobby of his.

Ballou checked out the Web site, and Williams' alter ego was soon born.

"He was very into recruiting, so I would always call up his show," Williams said of Ballou, also an FSU graduate. "He was the one who gave me the nickname Dot Com. I just built on it and built on it.

"Even to this day, (FSU defensive coordinator) Mickey Andrews still calls me Dot Com. I don't know if he knows my real name."

The Florida State sports buffet that Warchant.com has become is an 800-pound gorilla compared to the tiny Web site — or "Web page," as he calls it — Williams first created.

In 1994, a few years after graduating from Stetson University's law school, Williams was working for a local firm practicing mostly insurance defense law. The pay was good and the hours manageable, but Williams had a secret addiction he simply couldn't contain.

In his spare time, he often called 900 numbers to get his fix. No, not those 900 numbers. We're talking about the ones that were popular with college football fans in the early and mid-1990s.

Fans could call in to 900 numbers operated by so-called expert analysts such as Rivals.com pioneer Bobby Burton for the latest scoop on football recruiting. FSU was in the midst of its unprecedented run of 14 consecutive seasons of 10 wins and Top 5 finishes in the national polls, so the Seminoles were always a popular subject on the recruiting lines.

Williams, who said he got hooked on FSU football during the 1987 Miami-FSU classic at Doak Campbell Stadium, took notes from the calls and eventually started placing some of the information on the first incarnation of Warchant, which he called FSUNoles.com.

“Recruiting is what really got me into it,” he said. “I was one of those fanatics that would call the 900 numbers, and I would get the newsletters, too.”

In the beginning, he added items such as FSU’s football schedule, the Seminoles’ roster and perhaps a couple of thoughts on some of the recruits to feed his latest hobby. Meanwhile, wife Stacy wasn’t sure what to make of her husband’s new obsession, but with the couple’s two young daughters still a few years away, she gave it her blessing.

“It just happened at a great time of our lives,” Stacy Williams said. “It was the perfect time for him to go out and give it a shot. I didn’t realize how big it could become. I’m glad my husband has a job that he is passionate about.”

For the rest of the 1990s, Gene Williams continued to practice law and run the Web site on the side. He eventually teamed up with the Rivals.com network, a group of college fan sites that now have hundreds of thousands of subscribers across the nation.

While joining Rivals.com helped the Web site grow, Williams worked constantly to create a living by doing something he loved to do.

But it didn’t happen overnight. There were many hurdles to clear, such as convincing FSU’s sports information office to grant him media credentials to cover practice and games. FSU first put him on a mailing list, and later allowed him to cover practice, and eventually games, like the mainstream media.

“Nobody was doing sports on the Internet full time back then,” Williams said. “There was some initial hesitancy.”

While gaining access to the players, coaches and games was a huge step, Williams also faced the daunting task of getting word out about the site. He worked tirelessly promoting the Web site and tweaking it over the years as more and more fans signed up.

“We didn’t really know what he was doing,” said former Tampa Tribune Florida State beat writer Doug Carlson, who was on the beat when Williams first started showing up regularly. “We were kind of like, ‘Who is this guy?’ The Internet was still so new, no one really knew what to make of it.”

Somewhere along the way, Williams realized that he could make a living at this new media venture and decided to turn his hobby into a full-time job. He eventually gave up practicing law and spent all of his time marketing the Web site and adding new content to keep fans coming back for more.

The fans took notice, drawn in by being able to add their voice to the coverage Williams provided.

“All of a sudden, I’m getting a couple of hundred people a day on the site,” Williams said. “I’m thinking, ‘Wow, people are actually reading this stuff.’ It’s just one of those things where, over the next couple of years, it grew.”

And grew and grew. The site evolved so much that as the Internet boom of the 1990s mushroomed late in the decade, FSU officials sent Williams a letter advising him to change the name of the site for legal reasons.

He chose Warchant to keep in line with the school’s tradition.

Chris Nee, now Warchant’s primary recruiting writer and a contributor to the site since his senior year of high school, remembers feeling like he discovered a pot of gold when he first stumbled across the Web site while growing up in Jacksonville.

“I loved it,” Nee said. “I was one of those guys who would sit in my high school classroom and instead of paying attention to what my teacher was talking about, I would be talking to one of my good friends, who was a Gator fan about FSU against Florida.”

“We were kind of those guys who knew a lot more than just what the newspapers said because we went to all the games and kept up with it. It was a community. It wasn’t like a newspaper where you read the article and you were done with it. You could go onto a message board and talk to other fans who were as obsessed as you were.”

Williams has a policy of not releasing exact subscription figures, but he said it’s a fair estimate to say that Warchant has “around 10,000” paid subscribers. You don’t have to be a math major to know that at \$10 a month, the dollars add up pretty nicely as a money-making business. He said individual page views usually range

between 8 million and 15 million a month.

However, success comes with a price.

During the Web site's first several years, Williams acted as the Lone Ranger for the garnet-and-gold masses, "waking up and spending the entire day working, seven days a week. For a few years, that was it except for eating dinner with my wife."

But since Warchant really started to blossom in 2000 — Williams said that's the first season he can remember covering every football game, home and away — he has added several staff members, including Nee as the recruiting writer, another writer to help cover the team on a daily basis, and a videographer to record player/coach interviews. Overall, Warchant has as many as 10 regular content contributors, easily allowing the Web site to pump out more FSU sports coverage than any of the state's newspapers or other media outlets.

Warchant also has a working agreement with The Osceola, a weekly newspaper that has been covering FSU athletics for more than 25 years. Ira Schoffel, general manager of The Osceola, is a veteran newspaper reporter/editor who also has extensive experience working online, including at CBSsportsline.com when that Web site was first starting.

As Warchant's prominence in FSU media circles has grown the past few years amidst the decline of newspapers — in the past year alone the Tampa Tribune, Florida Times-Union, Palm Beach Post and The Miami Herald have all eliminated their FSU beat writer positions — the site has been under more journalistic scrutiny than ever before, waging a couple of public spats with the Orlando Sentinel in recent months. (Generally, Warchant took Sentinel columnists to task for Gator bias and focusing on bad news while the newspaper shot back about Warchant's homer tendencies.)

Mainstream print journalists over the years have accused fan Web sites such as Warchant of over-sensationalizing stories to keep fans hooked; fan Web sites have accused print journalists of harping on the negative and showing a lack of respect.

Schoffel strives for a balance between his background and Warchant's mission to give fans what they want.

"Gene has always been very respectful of the fact that he doesn't have a journalism background," Schoffel said. "He is a genius at marketing. The first couple of years, we were all trying to find our way.

"Our objective is to try to be more feature- and analysis-driven," Schoffel said of The Osceola. "But it's hard when you also provide content daily for the Web site. It definitely is a challenge to try and keep The Osceola relative."

Tom D'Angelo, a veteran reporter for the Palm Beach Post who covered FSU on and off for 20 years prior to being reassigned last fall, is aware how difficult it is for newspapers to compete with fan Web sites such as Warchant, second only to BamaOnline.com in the number of paid subscriptions among sites on the Rivals.com network, according to Williams.

"People were always happy getting their main news and features from newspapers," D'Angelo said. "Then these recruiting sites started popping up. People just ate that stuff up. It just mushroomed from that.

"(Newspapers) don't have the bodies to call every kid FSU is recruiting,"

Schoffel agrees that recruiting helped build the fan sites, but he also believes that as newspapers have cut coverage in recent years, more and more fans are going to these sites for everyday news and for the community aspect.

"To me, really the success of all these sites is largely the members," Schoffel said. "The Web is sort of like all these gathering places. Where do people want to gather? Now it's Facebook. People find a site they like and are comfortable, and once you get that mass, that's what really get these things going.

"Once you start having users post news, that's the hugest advantage you can have," Schoffel said. "There was a period there when somebody in the athletic department was posting news on players getting suspended on a weekly basis. If they had been doing that on another site, people would have gone there. Winning those early battles was big."

The argument can be made that Warchant.com is now the most visible media outlet covering FSU sports on a regular basis. It's certainly the leader among the "new electronic media" outlets that have sprung up over the past decade.

The Tallahassee Democrat, Orlando Sentinel and St. Petersburg Times still devote staff writers to cover the Seminoles,

but none match the amount of content that Warchant offers. Of course, newspapers aren't interested in a lot of the content Warchant provides — trivial information such as regular updates on players changing numbers, their workout routines, etc. — but the fans are.

"I'm addicted to Warchant," said Bill Kidd, membership director of the Seminole Club of Greater Orlando and one of 10 volunteer moderators who monitor Warchant's various message boards throughout the day. "It's the first place I go in the morning and the last place I go at night. If you're a Seminole fan, it's the place to be."

Williams never envisioned the site developing into what it has become. He said his biggest issue is dealing with the message boards, since many fans want to play reporter or the gossip game without any facts supporting what they say.

Williams says many times fans have posted information on the message boards as fact when it has turned out to be false rumors. The moderators try to remove such material as fast as they can.

"That is a major hassle on the site and something I never envisioned," Williams says.

Williams isn't sure of how the site will evolve in the future, but he is considered a pioneer in the Rivals.com network and often speaks to other owners at the network's annual convention.

"I never anticipated the way it has evolved from a hobby into a pretty big media outlet covering Florida State," he said. "The Internet has changed so much. We have tried to reinvent the wheel every year. The fans know what they want to see and what they like and what they don't like. That's how it got to this point. It's blown up beyond my belief since then."

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