

# SPORTS

grades. Before playing for Kent State, Bennett was set to play for Arkansas – Little Rock, but changed his mind after a change in the team's coaching. He took a year in between to study at Link Year Prep in Missouri to help him get set for his college career, then signed on to Kent State.

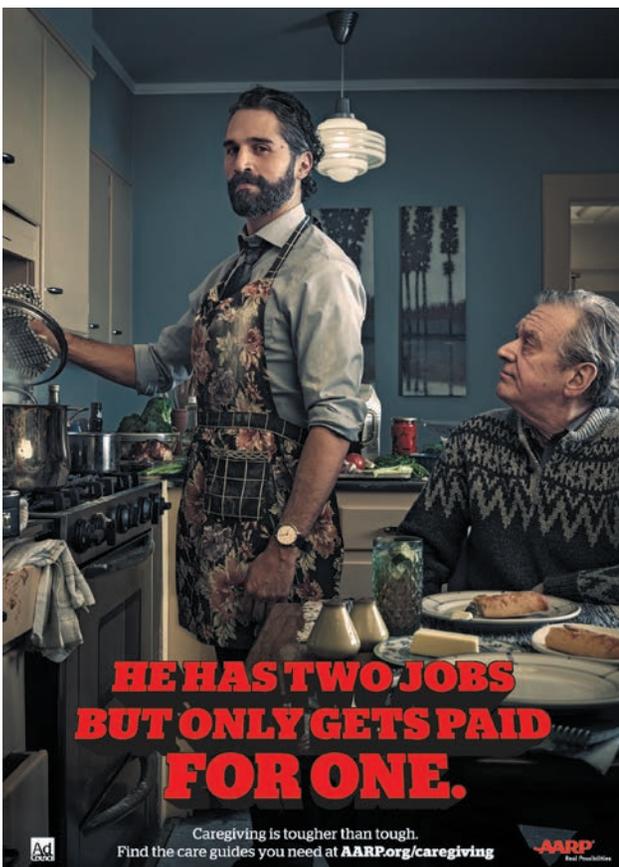
Though he is the first player with autism to be playing on a team full-time, Anthony Ianni, now a motivational speaker for autism bullying awareness, was technically the first athlete to play Division I basketball, though he was not on scholarship and only played for limited minutes from 2009-2012.

Mr. Ianni reached out to Bennett on Twitter, encouraging him to keep working hard at his sport: “[C]ongrats to @Ktech50 on his signing to Kent State Hoops & thus showing that individuals like us on the Autism Spectrum can do incredible things.”

One thing Bennett wants people to remember is that he was recruited for his basketball skills—not because the school had pity on him for his condition. To quote a tweet from November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018, “Don’t get me wrong it’s cool to make history but they wanted me because I CAN HOOP AND I LOVE PLAYING BASKETBALL.”

He also asked that his mom be near the campus for support, stating that “the separation anxiety really doesn’t upset me [any] more. But at the same time, I still like that support . . . I still want to make sure I see my mom’s face.”

Autism Speaks’ Director of Adult Services David Kearon also reached out to Bennett, praising him for his decision and wanting to be a role model for kids. He said, “The public nature of his decision can have a really great impact on younger children with autism who may not have seen this as a path for them.” Bennett could have gone along quietly with his acceptance onto his team, but he knew that this could be a chance to turn the favor towards kids struggling with autism and show them that they are talented and are just as capable as their peers. †



## US Bank Stadium Basketball Classic: A Glimpse at What's to Come

BY BEN DIERS

**T**HROUGHOUT ITS TWO-YEAR LIFESPAN, US Bank Stadium has hosted many different types of events. Its primary purpose is to serve as the location of Minnesota Vikings football games, but the stadium has also hosted many other events including the Super Bowl, the X Games, various concerts ranging from Metallica to Taylor Swift, and most recently, college basketball games.

On the weekend of November 30<sup>th</sup>, US Bank Stadium hosted the US Bank Stadium Classic. This event saw four different NCAA basketball games split up over two nights. The first matchup of the weekend was between the University of St. Thomas and the University of Wisconsin–River Falls, while the second game was the marquee matchup of the weekend with the University of Minnesota taking on Oklahoma State University. The Tommies and Gophers each won their games, respectively. The second day of the event started with Drake University defeating North Dakota State University and the event finished with South Dakota State University defeating the University of Northern Iowa.

In many ways, this event served as a precursor for the future of basketball games at US Bank Stadium. In early April 2018, the building will host the Final Four of the NCAA March Madness men’s basketball tournament. The inaugural games played in the US Bank Stadium Classic will give those in charge of the building an idea of how the space works during basketball games.

Stadium management put to the test many different facets of the building’s performance including lighting, acoustics, seating, and locker rooms to get a better idea how to plan for the main event next Spring. Though they tested many different aspects of basketball in the stadium, not all the required elements of the Final Four games were present for these initial games. For example, two things that will be in place for the Final Four games that were noticeably absent were the center-hung scoreboard and the custom darkening curtains, which are still being produced.

While the games at the US Bank Stadium classic were well attended, with over 15,000 fans coming to games on both days, that hardly compares to the expected attendance of the Final Four games in April. Each of those games, both national semifinals and the national championship, are expected to draw around 70,000 fans to the stadium.

These staggering numbers mean that there will be inherent differences between the games played at the US Bank Stadium Basketball Classic and those played during the Final Four, but it still gives building management a base to work from and an idea of what to expect come tournament time in April. †

## Tyler Dunn’s NFL Playoff Predictions

BY TYLER DUNN

**W**HEN LOOKING at the National Football League as it progresses through December, it is crunch time for many NFL franchises. The race for the twelve NFL playoff spots is tightening up and is more than likely to come down to the last week of the season, as it does most years.

**The AFC East:** The Patriots are going to run away with this division and will secure a bye for the first round in the AFC. This division has been weak for a decade and most likely will remain that way until the New York Jets and Sam Darnold are able to begin to challenge New England and make the division competitive.

**The AFC South:** Houston and Deshaun Watson have been on a tear for the last month and a half, and have been excellent, winning nine consecutive games. Indianapolis has been having a bounce-back year but will likely not be able to make up enough ground to catch the Texans.

**The AFC West:** Kansas City has been dominant for a majority of the season, with Patrick Mahomes entering the MVP conversation and a loaded offensive roster. However, with the recent release of star Kareem Hunt, the Chiefs lose one of their most explosive players and could struggle to find a spark on offense. The LA Chargers and the Denver Broncos are also having very good seasons, however, Kansas City will win this division and be a threat in the postseason.

**The AFC North:** The AFC North is somewhat up for grabs. Currently, Pittsburgh leads the division by a half game. The Steelers have been a favorite for this division all year long and many people think they will lock up the AFC North again. I disagree as I think the drama around the Steelers, on and off the field, hurts them and I anticipate Baltimore sneaking in and winning the division on the last day of the season.

**AFC Wild Cards:** I think Indianapolis, behind Andrew Luck and the LA Chargers, are going to take the wild card spots in the AFC. Pittsburgh potentially could lose three of their last four and miss the playoff.

**The NFC East:** The Cowboys will win this division period. Not because Dallas is a superior team, but Washington is in trouble with their third quarterback and Philadelphia struggled to beat Washington while playing Mark Sanchez last week. Philadelphia will not repeat as Super Bowl Champions and will miss the playoffs this year.

**The NFC South:** The New Orleans Saints have been dominant all season long. Drew Brees is rolling and breaking NFL records left and right. Lock it up, Saints will win this division and lock up a bye as well.