

THE WEST GEOLOGIAN

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"I ALWAYS
WANTED TO BE
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF,
BUT I DIDN'T
THINK IT WAS
POSSIBLE"

UWG ALUMNI RETURN FOR
MEDIA DAY 2023

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LIVING WEST



**KELLY WILLIAMS:
THE MIND
BEHIND
MEDIA DAY**
SAMIRA BARNETT
Contributing Writer

The University of West Georgia brings in the 41st annual Media Day, with alumni and professor, Kelly Williams leading this year’s event once again. Williams makes a significant contribution to the university and adds a distinctive twist in order to give students and alumni the best experience.

Williams has been involved with Media Day since she was a part-time employee at the university five years ago, prior to her full-time position. She was a member of the executive committee that helped younger alumni participate in Media Day. This was the start of her journey to becoming the event’s coordinator. It takes several months of diligent work from a team of people for this event to be successful.

“We started planning Media Day at the end of September, beginning of October,” said Williams. “We look at evaluations from the year prior and see what changes we need to make and what those changes are going to look like.”

Media Night is a potential change for the fall semester. This event would replace the luncheon that usually occurs, allowing students to have dinner and connect with fellow students and donors all while celebrating student professional achievement.

Williams’ long association with the university as an alum and faculty member has given her a unique perspective on the event and what other potential changes could be made.

“I just think having those three personas [alum to part-time, and full-time] helps open up to even more ideas and feedback,” said Williams. “It also helps being an alum when it comes time to reach out to networking people. I can

hit up all the people I went to class with.”

High expectations are placed on Media Day with numerous keynote speakers and panelists coming to enlighten and inform students about the job market. They also offer advice on how to become the best professional you can be, regardless of their focus in mass communication or even non-Mass Comm majors.

“Over the last few years, it has looked very different since I’ve been in charge,” said Williams. “Last year we started something new, having multiple panels because we want our students to be able to interact with as many professionals as possible.”

The keynote speaker for the day will be Atlanta-based filmmaker Karlyn Exantus Taylor, who has established herself in the business. The day will then transition into panels, with two different panel sessions providing advice to students on what to do in school and what to do after graduation.

“We have a good balance representing all the different concentrations,” said Williams. “We have people who work in Journalism, we have people who work in PR (Public Relations), we have filmmakers and people who do content creation.”

“We try to have a good cross section with our panelists so our students can see themselves in the panel,” Williams continued.

Instead of the luncheon, there will be a reception outside in the atrium of the Campus Center, during which the event will shift from panels to networking, with a variety of professionals in attendance.

“We have over 55 networking professionals that have registered plus our student organizations take us up to 60 some-

thing tables inside the ballroom for students to walk around and interact,” said Williams.

Students may gain an internship or even a job during the networking session, as some professionals and employers are looking for new candidates. As a result, it is recommended that you bring a resume to hand out to specific professionals. During this time, students will also be able to display previously submitted work, giving professionals a glimpse of the students’ achievements.

“The networking session is kind of like the heart of Media Day,” said Williams.

It is unclear whether this will be Williams’ final year organizing Media Day, as Media Night may become an event. She has, however, made significant progress, and her hard work continues to produce such an excellent large event for the School of Mass Communications and UWG itself.

“I will always be involved somehow in Media Day,” said Williams. “I will continue working on it until there is a new project to work on.”

“For the school of Communication, Film, and Media it is our premiere signature event,” Williams continued. “I’m very proud of the work that I’ve done with Media Day.”

Media Day will begin at 10 a.m. on March 8 in the Campus Center Ballroom and conclude at 3:30 p.m. Attendance is open to all students.

“This event is known for bringing a lot of people back to campus and bringing new people to campus to show off the gem that is University of West Georgia,” said Williams. “It’s always been a great event, but my goal is to push to top tier excellence.”

Photo Courtesy of Kelly Williams

**THE STRUGGLE
OF CHOOSING
A MAJOR**
MYLES WILLIAMS
Contributing Writer

Andrew Will, a Department of Mass Communication professor at UWG, went through the major indecision like most college students, not knowing what to major in until much later in his college experience.

“When I started college I declared engineering as my major since I heard they made a lot of money,” said Will. “But after I saw my teacher put those numbers on the board I knew this wasn’t for me, then I majored in fine arts for about a year but then I thought what kind of job I could get with this.”

“I thought about what I enjoyed when I was a child and what I enjoyed was having my own radio station,” continued Will. “I had a dynamite that would allow me to bleed over a radio frequency and would allow people to hear my voice, but only across the street. My little brother would help me make commercials and I remember having fun doing that so after that I decided to major in Communications and it was no turning back.”

Will started teaching part time in 2011 and became full time

at UWG in 2015, totalling him 12 years at UWG today. While being at the University of West Georgia for that long, Will has taught his fair share of classes.

“I’ve taught a number of courses, the very first course I taught was TV production, radio production, radio practicum, Broadcast News Writing and Reporting, Intro to Mass Communication, Media Ethics and I also taught Sports Communication,” said Will.

For Will, working at UWG was just supposed to be part time work for him. Especially since it was not too far from him.

“At the time I was teaching at Clark Atlanta University, and I was looking for some part time work as a part time professor at a different school and at that time I was just looking for another school to teach at, so I could get some extra classes under my belt,” said Will. “I lived in Douglasville, so I knew about the University of West Georgia so it made me interested in what it has to offer.”

Every teacher always has a favorite part of teaching students something in class. Professor Will has a few aspects that he loves to see in the classroom.

“I love to have “wide-eye” students to where I amaze them about how certain stuff would work and see them so astonished by it,” said Will. “My favorite aspect of teaching students is just to excite them about how things work and to make them feel good about the major they choose.”

Certain teachers help impact student’s lives in ways they could not even imagine. Those teachers are the ones that students will always remember for the rest of their life. Will has definitely done his part to help impact student’s lives any way possible.

“I like to have one-on-one sessions with students, so that they can understand the importance of education and the importance of getting out there in the field,” said Will. “I like to tell them a lot about internships so that they can get ready to start a career right after college if that’s their plan.”

“I truly believe in education, and people bettering themselves,” continued Will. “If a student needs a recommendation letter I’d give it to them. I’ve had times where I gave a recommendation letter to not so good students because I saw something in them that they could bring to an industry or organization.”



Photo Courtesy of The University of West Georgia

THE

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LIVING WEST

WOLF SPORTS RADIO NETWORK PACKS A PUNCH FOR MEDIA DAY

DOUGLAS SALTER
Contributing Writer

Media Day 2023 is almost here, and WOLF Sports Radio Network is ready to showcase everything they have to offer. WOLF Sports Radio Network is part of the University of West Georgia radio team. They put out a variety of shows and podcasts including UWG sports and sports from around the world.

“WOLF Sports Radio Network is going to have a great presence at Media Day 2023,” said Director of WOLF Sports Radio Network Brenden Willoughby-Ray. “Everyone will be able to meet the staff and will also be able to discover what makes our station so

special. We also plan to showcase a little bit of what we do.”

The entire WOLF Sports Radio Network team plans to display shows that they often put out all the time on WOLF Sports Radio Network.

“You’ll see different personalities from popular WOLF Sports Radio Network shows and podcasts such as Sports Pack, Sports Outta Pocket and Tea Time at Media Day 2023,” said Willoughby-Ray.

Founded by Dr. Brad Yates in 2009, the network envisions a comprehensive experiential learning lab in radio for students. They value management, student leadership, achievement, caring, collaboration, inclusiveness, innovation, integrity, sustainability, and wisdom, which are all evident in their content.

WOLF Sports Radio Network’s overall goal for Media Day 2023 is to promote the station, as well as showcase all of their different members on staff.

“We will be set up for the majority of the event promoting WOLF Sports Radio Network and WOLF Radio in general,” said Willoughby-Ray. “A collection of personalities from the station will be there.”

Media Day in general is a great way to meet people and enhance networking skills. Willoughby-Ray is not only looking forward to displaying his work, but he is also looking forward to the event as a whole.



Image Courtesy of Wolf Sports Network

UWG STUDENT LEADS PEERS DOWN THE ROAD TO PR SUCCESS

JAMIE COCHRAN
Contributing Writer

bluestone, a student-led Public Relations Firm connects with corporations, government agencies, and non-profit organizations to provide experiential learning experience for UWG students.

bluestone serves as a practicum course for students. However, the opportunities go beyond the classroom. The experience challenges students to run a real-life public relations firm where on and off-campus projects expand to communication research and planning, and image and brand management. Brooke Yearta, Firm Director at *bluestone*, leads the experiential lab to gain public relations experience in the professional world while completing her degree.

“As a firm director, I have gained leadership, management and strategic thinking skills,” said Yearta. “This position has provided me with the opportunity to improve my public speaking, writing, editing and designing skills.”

For students pursuing any degree at UWG, *bluestone* follows the path of any traditional internship. Students can join *bluestone* more than once for more real-life experiences and higher-paid positions. This ensures that members will have more opportunities for internships and less training when they enter the workforce.

“This is my second time with

bluestone,” said Yearta. “To me, students are much more well-rounded after *bluestone*. Their communication, writing, editing, and creative skills undergo a lot of growth.”

Members of *bluestone* will be creating all the design pieces to promote for Media Day. They will have samples of their work to showcase to potential new members and networking professionals on Media Day. Current members will also network and share their experiences with professionals for internship opportunities.

“I want Media Day to aid in the exposure of *bluestone* and everything it can do for students no matter their majors,” said Yearta. “Getting the word out allows for higher enrollment in the class and employment allows for the firm to continue its success upon my graduation from the firm.”

At *bluestone*, the practicum is not just for PR majors, but for any student wanting to expand in marketing, communications and business management.

“There are other on-campus paid positions that students can get after completing *bluestone* because the experience provides them with marketing, communication and business skills,” said Yearta. “We strive for bettering students’ skills and their portfolios before entering the workforce upon graduation.”

Professor Taylor Bryant is the Faculty Advisor for *bluestone*. He said the experience from the practicum will bridge the gap between in-class learning and the professional experience students will gain when they graduate with their degrees.

“I allow students to fully

engage as public relations professionals by working with multiple clients while holding positions and responsibilities that mirror professional public relations firms,” said Bryant. “This strategy fosters creativity, innovation and professional excellence for our students, making them more marketable when transitioning into the industry.”

As a firm directory, Yerta serves as the project manager and coordinates all of the clients that service with *bluestone*. Her position permits her to be the final editor of all projects before they are finalized by Bryant. She manages all students and paid employees with the help of the communications and creative directors.

“My main goal is to make communication between students, employees and clients as clear as possible,” said Yearta. “I hope others are able to gain the experience I got through this program.”



Photo Courtesy of Brooke Yearta

LIVING WEST

EXECUTIVE EDITOR OF THE
ROME NEWS-TRIBUNE
DISCUSSES THE IMPORTANCE
OF MEDIA LITERACY IN THE
DIGITAL AGE
GEORGE EDWARDS
Contributing Writer

John Bailey, the Executive Editor at the Rome News-Tribune, joins panelists for the session on *Career Success in an Evolving Media Landscape* for University of West Georgia’s 41st Annual Media Day on March 8.

After starting out at the RN-T as a beat reporter in 2007, Bailey has held the Executive Editorial role since 2018.

“I like to call it a battlefield promotion,” says Bailey. “People left, and you just get ranked up and you get ranked up.”

As a beat reporter, Bailey specialized in Crime and Courts. “The first day off the rip, we go into a really complex federal drug trafficking trial,” Bailey says. “It was one of the couriers, and the main guy— who had flipped and talked to the feds— about this one guy who had been selling crazy expensive horse tranquilizers out of Hiram.

“I could just sit here and talk for a couple hours about the hundreds of crazy stories involved in this one thing,” says Bailey. “I still to this day, if I get a chance and I can go cover a court case I love to do it. As a writer, as somebody who is a communicator, watching the arguments form and watching the back and forth in a courtroom— and then having to relate that to someone— is challenging, it’s interesting.”

Bailey graduated from Georgia Highland College and Shorter University. He once worked in the tech sector— hated it— and then worked construction among other jobs before

returning to school. He graduated with a general diploma from the highlands with a degree in Public Relations.

“I would say, if you want to get into this field: Internships,” said Bailey. “That way you get that hands on experience and you decide ‘Hey, man, I don’t like this— or I love it— or I want to try it some more.’”

Throughout his years in journalism, Bailey has seen the acceleration of internet news throughout the 2010s. When he began his career, the field was print focused and digital was a “side thing” but now there is far more flexibility digitally.

“Just to take one very small part— headlines, for example— print headlines had to be very concise,” continues Bailey. “A digital headline can be a sentence or two, where you’re trying to convey ‘this is what I want you to see in order for you to read it.’”

With the explosion of social media in recent years, journalism, and public discourse in a broader sense has found itself undergoing a massive transformation.

“How people’s attitudes have changed with the advent of social media, I like to call it the ‘bulletproof effect,’ or the ‘you can’t punch me in the mouth because I said this’ effect,” says Bailey. “Twitter, for example, if you get out there and you’re a jerk— you get pushed out there a lot more.

“It could be, and should be, such a great thing,” says Bailey. “People being able to have their voices heard through non-traditional methods— not just through a newspaper.

“Social media should be, and could be, such a great thing— and the problem is, at this point I don’t

think it is,” continues Bailey.

“My advice would be, you have to read critically, and that’s not always easy to do,” Bailey says. “You have to choose what you view critically— you can get on TikTok and scroll through videos, and goof off, same thing with Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, you name it— but as you consume information you do need to read it critically.

Bailey recommends consuming information critically. When learning about new topics, it’s more important to look at the source and especially at peer-reviewed articles, something vital to legitimate journalism.

“Depending on how deep I’m going, but I’ll look for news organizations that I have developed a trust in— many of those are legacy: New York Times, Washington Post, even newer ones like Bloomberg,” says Bailey. “You can read it; they cite their sources— this is a big thing— are they citing their sources?”

However, television news is a mixed bag in Bailey’s eyes.

“I guess, Infotainment, they’re trying to shock you and make you angry— I get where they’re coming from— they do make money off it, I think that type of thing as a general news source is bad for you,” Bailey says. “CNN, Fox, all these large news networks— they have solid news stuff— but once you get onto the TV network it’s primarily opinion because they have to fill space and they have to fill time.”

In short, Bailey stresses the importance of careful media consumption.

“We need to be talking to each other, we need to be communicating,” says Bailey. “We need to really be considering what we want as people, and what we want as a State, as a country, as a college.”



Photo Courtesy of John Bailey

LIVING WEST



AWARD-WINNING STUDENT-RUN WOLF RADIO GRANTS ENDLESS OPPORTUNITIES
JAMIE COCHRAN
Contributing Writer

WOLF Radio is a fully functional college radio station that is entirely operated by students and plays an important role in media day. WOLF Radio plays an active role in broadcasting the events during Media Day which takes place on March 8 in the Campus Center Ballroom at UWG. The radio station also informs UWG students what is happening on campus and the surrounding Carrollton Community. The Operations Manager of WOLF Radio, Michael Tucker has been a part of the university for many years as a UWG student and alumnus. “I started at UWG in 2013 and when I graduated a new position under Shawn came available,” said Tucker. Shawn Isaacs is the General Manager and student founder of WOLF Radio and helped start the station back in 2009-2010. WOLF Radio provides students with hands-on experience in radio programming, production, management, and promotion. Meaning everything done by the ra-

dio station is all created by UWG students. “They create all the content,” said Tucker. “All the shows that are done on-air and off-air are all done by the students. Shawn and I do not create anything, we just make sure they know what they are doing.” UWG students produce all the live shows including music, news, and sports programming. On Media Day, students from WOLF Radio will be up on stage doing live shows between networking sessions and showcasing their work to other professionals. “We will be broadcasting live shows during the networking sessions on Media Day,” said Tucker. “Six of our on-air shows will be doing short teasers of their full broadcasts. Film and Video students will have the opportunity to have trailers run so students and professionals can see their work.” Many Wolf Radio students do not require much on-the-job training because of their campus experience. “Almost immediately after grad-

uation we regularly have students picked up by other radio stations in Atlanta,” said Tucker. “Our name is known in Atlanta. To walk out of college and right into Atlanta is huge for any student.” The station has been recognized in both national and international competitions, including Best College Radio Station from the Intercollegiate Broadcasting System. “There are too many awards to name individually,” said Tucker. “Students have won dozens of other awards ranging from on-air awards, videography awards, promotions, and productions as well.” Tucker hopes his teaching strategies can positively affect UWG students. “As a mentor and advisor, my goal is to provide students with all of the tools they need to thrive in a media landscape, especially radio,” said Tucker. “I always encourage students to think critically about all that is needed to accomplish a goal from the start, because if you do all the work in planning, the execution becomes easy.”

PATRICK SNIPES: PROJECT MANAGER AND EDITOR EXTRAORDINAIRE
RACHAEL BROWN
Contributing Writer

UWG alumnus Patrick Snipes has some words of wisdom for current students who are interested in growing their skills to pursue a creative career. Snipes mainly works on managing video projects and video editing. “Project management is basically the client saying, ‘I need x, y, z,’ and I take it and I direct on who does,” said Snipes. “It is like what graphic designer is going to do it, and what 3D person is going to do it. I am the one who uses the network that I have built throughout the years. I ask people who I have worked with before if they are open to do a project, and assign that to them while giving them the details of the project, deadlines and so forth. Video editing is kind of self explanatory, that’s how I got my start.” Snipes also explained that his education was import-

ant to his success. He still uses what he has learned at UWG to this day. Most of what he has learned has come from experiences he gained after college. “College was really good at teaching me the bedrock of what I need to know as an editor and producer,” said Snipes. “It was really good at giving me the fundamentals, the very beginning of stuff. All the advanced stuff I learned on the job.” A large part of the advanced stuff that Snipes has learned has to do with theory, or how visuals can have an impact on the eyes and minds of the audience. In many cases, theory can be almost more important to learn than fundamentals and technical knowledge. “You can learn all the fundamentals you want, but you need to understand the theory, like ‘how long is too long of a shot?’ things that person to person will think differently,” said Snipes. “But because of some of the stuff that I learned at West Georgia, and I got better with it over time, it taught me those little things that you just

don’t learn through just doing.” For those who are thinking about pursuing a creative career, Snipes encourages students not to make that decision lightly. “Go into it if you really, really, really want to do it,” said Snipes. “I tell this to a lot of people who graduate college, a lot of people who I graduated with did not continue, and I understand because it’s not an easy field to be in.” Snipes emphasizes the importance of continuing to learn, even after college. In this way, students who pursue careers in mass communication, and in creative concentrations, must be committed to becoming lifelong learners. “You have to consistently keep learning,” said Snipes. “College is not the only place where you can learn. Learn from your coworkers. I’m always looking at what the new apps are around, I always go on social media to see what people who are younger than me, sometimes even people who are older than me, are doing when it pertains to certain topics.”

LIVING WEST



Photo Courtesy of Kayla Henderson

Kayla Henderson dreamed of being a journalist since childhood. Now, she is returning to UWG for Media Day as a panelist.

“When I took the practicum, I took it my junior year,” says Henderson. “I was like, this is something I’ve always wanted to do. I always wanted to be Editor-in-Chief, but I didn’t think it was possible.”

The ‘22 alum was writing for The West Georgian as a practicum student when advisor Dr. John Sewell thought she would be a good fit for Editor-in-Chief and offered her the job. Henderson gladly accepted the position and ran the paper until her graduation.

Henderson’s time at The West Georgian offered her the opportunity to be a part of the newsroom setting she always dreamed of.

“It was something that was really important to me,” says Henderson. “I loved being able to see a different side of [things] and keep it alive. I miss being in that environment and getting to meet people and have a small, tiny

part in every single thing that went into publishing.”

Due to COVID-19, Henderson was only able to participate in one in-person Media Day while on staff at The West Georgian. Being her senior year, she did not expect to gain much from the event. However, Media Day brought more opportunities than she anticipated.

“I was just kind of like, I’m here for the paper, and we had our booth,” says Henderson. “I was talking to this lady named Charity Aaron who worked for the Carroll County School of Performing Arts Center. She told me that she worked for the paper when she went to West Georgia. I told her I was doing photography and wanted to be a photojournalist.”

Aaron, went on to create a brand new internship program just for Henderson at the Performing Arts Center. She worked there during her final semester of college taking pictures for the organization.

“It just goes to show that if you go and meet people and just talk to them, things

can be created from you just by being there in the same space,” says Henderson.

Henderson moved to Florida in August. She now works for the Walt Disney Company in the entertainment sector as a photographer for PhotoPass.

“It’s on a much bigger level than I’ve ever experienced,” says Henderson. “I think around 1,500 pictures a day just within my shift time. I do a lot of guest interaction. I meet people from all over the world and it’s truly like the coolest job ever.

“It’s super fun,” continues Henderson. “I feel like everything I do I can relate back to my major. So I try to use the things I learned in school, especially the networking aspect.”

No matter where her career takes her, Henderson will always be proud of her time at The West Georgian.

“I really care about the legacy of the paper and everything that The West Georgian does,” says Henderson. “It’s small but it’s important. It’s been around for so long. I miss it all the time.”

ENTERTAINMENT

PARAMORE
BREAKS THEIR
SILENCE WITH
NEW ALBUM

EMMA SWALES
Contributing Writer

Paramore made a return after a six-year break with the release of their newest album, “This is Why.” The album was released on Feb. 10, kicking off 2023 with ten new songs. Countless fans have awaited Paramore’s return to music, and they did not disappoint. “This is Why” stays true to the band’s original edgy style while also incorporating a new-wave pop rhythm. They created an album packed full of nostalgia straight from the post-punk era of the early 2010s. The first five songs jump-start the album with fast-paced instrumentals along with Hayley Williams’ unique vocals. Songs like “The News” and “This is Why” contain powerful lyrics written by Williams accompanied by a heavy backbeat from drummer Zac Farro. Paramore’s lyrics face the feeling of discomfort and anxiety that comes with growing older and detail the hardships of living in a post-quarantine society. The album seemed to portray a coming-of-age story, beginning with the first song “This is Why” and finishing with the last, “Thick Skull.” Each song worked together perfectly to tell the narrative of becoming an adult dealing with negative emotions and relationships, and finally finding peace within yourself. Even though these lyrics carry a lot of weight, the instrumentals uphold the album’s positive feel. Halfway through the album, the songs begin to slow down and the band begins to venture into a new sound. Williams found comfort in tone and cadence while still maintaining her easily recognizable booming voice. Songs such as “Crave” and “Liar” feel slower and reflect aspects of new-wave pop. Taylor York, the band’s current guitarist, helped solidify this sound by incorporating a light tone and an introspective feel. These songs are different from Paramore’s usual emo-punk style and accurately show their ability to execute any tune perfectly. So far, the album has seemed to be very popular with Paramore fans on all music platforms. Their surprising return has been monumental in the alternative community and has reignited the spark of grungy pop-punk music. The album’s title song “This is Why,” has reached over 40 million listens on Spotify and has made its way up the charts. “Running out of Time,” the third song featured on the album, is pulling in second with nearly 8 million listens so far. Although the band experimented with new sounds and styles, I believe that Paramore still carries the same energy as they did when they released their first album in 2005. Williams’ distinct vocals, Farro’s supporting rhythm and York’s melodic sound came together to create a unique masterpiece. Overall, I would rate the album a 9/10. My three favorite songs were “Figure 8,” “Crave” and “Liar.” I believe “This is Why” is the perfect comeback for the band Paramore. They surprised their fans by expanding their musical style, while also maintaining a feeling of nostalgia. This album will be the perfect soundtrack for the upcoming summer and will continue to grow on the charts. Whichever genre you prefer, I guarantee that “This is Why” is an album worth listening to.

PREVIEWING MLS TEAMS’
CONCACAF CHAMPIONS
LEAGUE ROUND OF 16
MATCHUPS

GEORGE EDWARDS
Contributing Writer

After decades of hurt, 2022 finally saw MLS’ Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) Champions League drought come to an end, with Seattle Sounders securing a 5-2 aggregate victory over Mexico’s UNAM. Five MLS teams will compete in the 2023 edition of the competition, and beginning on March 7, will begin their campaign with eyes on securing a second consecutive title for the league.

Austin FC: Violette AC (Haiti) – Mar. 7, 14.

Two unknown quantities came together in the first tie of the 2023 CCL, with Violette AC – 1984 CONCACAF Champions Cup winners– facing 2022 MLS Western Conference runners-up Austin FC. The Haitian side qualifies for its first CCL (in this iteration, at least) after winning the 2022 Caribbean Club Championship– the final edition of the competition– and can list former CF Montreal midfielder Steeven Saba among their personnel. Austin qualified for its first CCL after an impressive year 2 showing and will be hoping for new signing Gyasi Zardes to link up with key player Sebastián Driussi – who earned a new contract following a stellar 2022 season. Leo Väisänen joined the team from Elfsborg in the offseason, and, along with the incoming Amro Tarek, will look to fill the defensive void left by the departed Ruben Gabrielsen. Other than these signings, along with the addition of experienced striker Will Bruin from the Seattle Sounders, we can probably expect a similar Austin FC to the one we saw last season.

It’s hard to see beyond Austin in this one, the side looks better on paper than it did last year, and without disrespecting Violette AC, I can only see the MLS side advancing here.

Philadelphia Union: Alianza (El Salvador) – Mar. 7, 14.

Last season’s MLS Cup runners-up, Philadelphia are many pundits’ favorites for domestic success going into the 2023 season, starting strong with a 4-1 win over Co-

lumbus, Philadelphia will look to do some damage on the continental stage too– taking on El Salvador’s Alianza in the round of 16.

Alianza currently top the El Salvadorian Clausura, and will be hoping to use its fine form to swing the matchup in its favor. Philadelphia will count on Julian Carranza and Daniel Gazdag to continue their blazing start to the season– both players netting braces on opening day.

Philadelphia is, in the view of many, the strongest team in the Eastern Conference, if not the entire league. If not for the inspired LAFC team of last year or the Covid-19 outbreak that saw a massively weakened team bow out to New York City FC in the 2021 Eastern Conference Finals– we could be looking at a 2-in-a-row champion. I see the side going deep in this competition and progressing here.

Orlando City: Tigres UANL (Mexico) – Mar. 7, 15.

Orlando opened their season with a 1-0 victory over the New York Red Bulls, and following a 2022 Lamar Hunt US Open Cup victory, the side will be looking to add more silverware in 2023. Standing in its way is Mexican powerhouse Tigres UANL, 2020 CCL winners.

The Mexican side has an immense arsenal of talent at its disposal, with evergreen ex-France international André-Pierre Gignac– despite turning 37 in December– still providing a massive threat in attack. Orlando can look to young Uruguayan star player Facundo Torres to provide the spark in this tie, with Peruvian shot-stopper Pedro Gallese capable of keeping the team in any match in goal.

This could be a tight one, but I feel that Tigres’ added match fitness could give them the cutting edge, and while I see Orlando putting up a fight, they’re likely to fall at the first hurdle here.

Vancouver Whitecaps: Real España (Honduras) Mar. 8, 15.

Opening its season with a 2-1 loss vs Real Salt Lake, 2022 Canadian Championship winners Vancouver will be taking on 2022 CONCACAF League semi-finalists Real España. The Whitecaps last played in this competition in 2016, making an impressive run to the Semi-finals, while España’s last appearance came in 2014, where it failed to escape the group stage. The Honduran side is currently 5th in domestic play, with 2022 CONCACAF League Golden Boot winner Ramiro Rocca and former LAFC loanee goalkeeper Luis López among the notable names the club has at its disposal. Vancouver missed the playoffs in

2022, and have looked to strengthen in the off-season by releasing Designated Player Lucas Cavallini to make room for the acquisition of Venezuelan striker Sergio Córdova from Germany’s FC Augsburg, and will be hoping he can add to the 11 goals in 34 matches he managed last season, on loan with RSL. Further notable additions for the Canadian side are goalkeeper Yohei Takaoka, signing from Yokohama F Marinos in Japan, and Uruguayan defender Mathías Laborda on a free transfer.

This one is hard to call, and could very well come down to how quickly Córdova gels with Whitecaps’ frontline, and it is imperative for the Canadian team that España does not win the first leg of the tie, or the ‘Caps could find themselves in some trouble, going to the Honduras with a deficit to overturn. My head can’t predict this one, but my heart has Vancouver edging the tie.

LAFC: Alajuelense (Costa Rica) – Mar. 9, 15.

After a dramatic 2022 MLS Cup win earning its place in the 2023 CCL, LAFC will only have one competitive fixture– after its El Trafico season opener vs LA Galaxy was postponed– ahead of its tie against 2022’s CONCACAF League runners-up Alajuelense. The Costa Rican side is currently first in the Clausura, and the team last competed in the competition in 2021, losing 2-0 to Atlanta United over two legs. LAFC will feel as if it has unfinished business in the CCL, last appearing in the 2020 final– where it led 1-0 against Tigres UANL, before a 72nd minute Hugo Ayala equalizer seemed to pull the wind from the side’s sails– leaving André-Pierre Gignac to finish off the Los Angeles team in the 84th minute.

The side has a few questions going into 2023, after losing big names like 128th minute MLS Cup hero Gareth Bale and team top-scorer Cristian Arango, as well as original team member Latif Blessing. However, fans can look forward to new signings Stipe Biuk and Timothy Tillman, who along with USMNT defender Aaron Long will provide an injection of fresh quality to look forward to. Furthermore, any team with Carlos Vela can consider itself as having a chance, the experienced Mexican may not be the player he was in his record-breaking 2019 season but can undoubtedly still produce game-winning quality on his day.

While Alajuelense ought to put up a stern test, with a strong veteran core– including former LA Galaxy and Columbus Crew defender Giancarlo Gonzalez– it is hard to look beyond the 2022 MLS Supporters Shield winners in this one, even with a potential lack of competitive fitness.