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News Release

Contact: Tom Hardy
Office: (312) 996-3772
Cell: (312) 543-7476
Email: hardyt@uillinois.edu

Note to journalists: A print-quality photo of Mike Thomas is available online: http://www.uillinois.edu/our/news/img/Thomas.Mike.jpg.

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Mike Thomas named Illini Athletic Director

Record of building winning programs with the highest degree of integrity

URBANA —The new athletic director of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign will be Mike Thomas, athletic director at the University of Cincinnati since 2005, subject to Board of Trustees approval, campus Chancellor-designee Phyllis Wise and university President Michael J. Hogan announced today.

Thomas, 51, has led a vibrant and successful Bearcats athletic program since he took the helm, winning five Big East team titles, an NCAA individual championship and producing 12 All-Americans in a wide range of sports and earning multiple Big East academic excellence awards.

"This is a terrific choice to lead the Fighting Illini program," said Wise, who is slated to become vice president of the University of Illinois and chancellor of the Urbana campus on Oct. 1, pending Board of Trustees approval. "Mike has an incredibly strong record of building winning programs with the highest degree of integrity and academic excellence. He has accomplished a lot with modest resources, and has a passion in his belly for the U of I."

Thomas said he is honored to be entrusted with a Big Ten athletics program with as much history and potential as the Division of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Illinois.

"Intercollegiate athletics are a critical element of the campus community, and I understand the importance of student-athletes excelling in both the playing arena and the classroom," Thomas said. "The U of I has the essential pieces—facilities, staff, athletes, alumni and fans—for continued excellence and success, and I'm deeply honored and excited to be able to lead the Fighting Illini."

Thomas, a 26-year veteran of college athletics administration, is credited with boosting the Bearcat athletic program to national prominence in men's and women's sports during his six years as athletic director.

Cincinnati's football program won back-to-back Big East titles in 2008 and 2009 – the first in school history – and finished 12-0 in 2009, winning the Sugar Bowl and placing third in the final BCS rankings.

Thomas also led a resurgence of the Bearcat men's basketball program, which is the only Division I team to improve its win total over each of the last five seasons. The Bearcats finished 26-9 in 2010-11, returning to the NCAA tournament for the first time since 2004-05.

Under his leadership, UC has also nearly tripled its donor base, and raised $70 million for the athletic program. He has expanded athletic facilities, including securing private funding for a new athletic center that includes new practice fields for football and other athletic teams.

During Thomas' tenure, the UC athletic program has been one of the most recognized schools for academic success in the 16-team Big East, including a league-best five team academic excellence awards in 2009-10.

"We selected Mike because of his great experience in both athletics and academics," Hogan said. "His student-athletes excel in competition, in the classroom, in leadership, and in life after collegiate athletics."

Since 2007, UC has a graduation rate of 70 percent among student-athletes, 10 percent higher than the overall student body. Bearcat student-athletes also have emerged as community leaders, increasing community service hours from 1,000 annually to more than 5,500 since 2006.

"At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign we wanted in our new Director of Athletics someone who understands the importance of winning athletic teams and who appreciates that, at Illinois, we would rather win than lose, but we would rather lose than cheat," said Christopher Kennedy, chairman of the Board of Trustees. "We don't want to cheat on the field, and we don't want to cheat our scholar athletes out of a full and complete education. We wanted someone who knew that teaching and coaching were as similar as learning and winning. Mike Thomas has a very successful record at a BCS university in terms of encouraging student athletes to be highly successful, both academically and athletically."

Thomas has increased external funding for the UC athletic department budget by $7 million, a 20 percent increase, while simultaneously reducing the annual operating deficit by more than $6 million.

"Mike has the ability to make tough decisions and will continue our long tradition of excellence at Illinois," said Robert Easter, interim chancellor of the Urbana-Champaign campus.

Cincinnati also established single-season attendance records for football in each of the last three seasons, and Nippert Stadium reached an average capacity of 97 percent in 2010.

Before taking the athletic director post at Cincinnati, Thomas spent five years as athletic director at the University of Akron and seven years as associate athletic director at the University

of Virginia. From 1986 to 1993, he was assistant athletic director for internal operations at the University of Denver.

Thomas has a bachelor's degree in business administration from Colorado State University, and a master's degree in athletic administration from Western Illinois University. He and his wife, Jenifer, have four children.

Thomas succeeds Ron Guenther as director of the Division of Intercollegiate Athletics (DIA) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Guenther retired in July after 19 years as athletic director at Illinois, with a legacy of winning Big Ten teams, integrity, fundraising success and expansion of varsity sports and recreation facilities.

The Division of Intercollegiate Athletics is responsible for 19 varsity sports and has 200 full-time employees and a $67 million budget. The Director of Athletics directs and coordinates the athletic program with the assistance of a management team consisting of associate directors responsible for sports programs, business affairs, marketing and promotions, public relations, development, academic affairs, external relations, and internal affairs.

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The University of Illinois is a world leader in research and discovery, the largest educational institution in the state with more than 76,000 students, 24,000 faculty and staff, and campuses in Urbana-Champaign, Chicago and Springfield. The U of I awards more than 19,000 undergraduate, graduate and professional degrees annually.