



NEWS RELEASE

From Pro Athlete to Tech Storyteller: Meet DICK'S Sporting Goods Manager of Communications & Branding

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Hunter Gilstrap didn't grow up dreaming of becoming a professional athlete. As a kid in a small town in South Carolina, he was more interested in comic books and drawing than organized sports. Soccer was something his parents signed him up for at the local YMCA in 1990. To him, it was just another activity to try.

That changed in the summer of 1994.

Gilstrap attended an overnight soccer camp at Furman University with a friend, the same week the World Cup final was played and the first hosted in the U.S. The entire camp watched the match together, and for the first time, soccer felt bigger than a weekend game. He was drawn to the goalkeepers. Not just their role, but their presence. They wore the loudest uniforms on the field, and at camp, they got their own jerseys.

"I was extremely jealous," he remembered. "From there, the rest was history."





A young Hunter Gilstrap at the start of his soccer journey.

Gilstrap decided he wanted to be a goalkeeper and went all in. He studied the few matches he could record on TV and watched them over and over before heading outside to copy what he'd seen. A visual learner, he supplemented limited local coaching by attending multiple camps each summer and seeking out anyone who could help him refine his game.

His goal was clear: play college soccer. And Gilstrap did just that, playing for the Clemson Tigers from 2001 – 2004 and for the College of Charleston as graduate student in 2005.



Gilstrap celebrating an ACC Championship win.

Professional soccer wasn't yet part of the picture. Major League Soccer barely existed, and the pathway wasn't obvious. But Gilstrap kept moving forward, letting the next step reveal itself.

In 2006, he was drafted by Miami FC and got his first taste of professional soccer through league play and international friendlies.

A year later, he joined the Cleveland City Stars and quickly became a fan favorite. He helped lead the team to a league championship in 2008. A brief stint overseas in South Africa followed before he returned to Cleveland to captain the team in 2009 season. Gilstrap earned recognition not just for his play, but for his leadership, which was a steady presence in a demanding, results-driven environment.

From 2010 through 2014, he became a cornerstone of the Pittsburgh Riverhounds, earning the league's Goalkeeper of the Year honors and First Team AllLeague recognition. He also spent a season with the Carolina RailHawks before returning to Pittsburgh for his final professional season in 2016.



Gilstrap playing for the Pittsburgh Riverhounds.

For a goalkeeper, success isn't always defined by highlight-reel moments. It's about long stretches of readiness and staying sharp when nothing is happening. It's scanning the field, organizing defenders and preventing problems before they start.

"You can't hide back there," Gilstrap said. "If you make a mistake, everyone sees it. So, you learn quickly how to reset."

That role taught him something else: communication isn't about volume.

Early in his career, Gilstrap was known for being loud, sometimes obnoxiously so he admitted. Over time, he learned that yelling complicated instructions rarely helped anyone. What worked were simple, precise cues:

"Left shoulder."

"Step."

"Man on."

Short. Actionable. Clear.

That mindset followed him long after he stepped away from the game.

Today, Gilstrap works in tech communications at DICK'S Sporting Goods, supporting organization-wide technology initiatives through storytelling, leader messaging and tech-wide moments that help teams understand what's changing and why it matters. The atmosphere may be different, but the stakes are real, especially when thousands of teammates rely on clear, timely information.

“In soccer, people don’t want a novel,” he said. “And in technology, it’s the same. People want to know what’s changing, why it matters and what they need to do next.”

His role has evolved over time. Working within the Office of Technology, he supports tech-wide communications and brand efforts, from graphic design and video production to event planning, leadership messaging and major organizational launches. The work is varied and rarely routine, a rhythm that feels familiar to a former professional athlete.

The transition out of sports wasn’t seamless. Like many athletes, Gilstrap had to navigate imposter syndrome and redefine his sense of value away from the field. What ultimately grounded him was recognizing that his greatest asset wasn’t technical expertise alone, but his ability to organize information, simplify complexity and guide people through change.

Gilstrap hasn’t completely stepped away from the game. As owner and head coach of Pro Player Goalkeeping, he trains goalkeepers of all ages, focusing on both technique and mental resilience.

“The save is the easy part,” he said. “The real work is being ready before the ball ever gets there.”

Most of his teammates at DICK’S don’t picture him diving across goal lines and most goalkeepers don’t think about technology initiatives. But the throughline is the same. In every role, Gilstrap helps people stay organized, confident and ready when something doesn’t go as planned.

Whether it’s organizing a back line before a corner kick or preparing a team for a company-wide update, the role still feels familiar: see the whole picture, communicate clearly and be ready when the moment comes.

Written by Rebecca Hoolahan