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Article: Sponsor, IMG play behind-the-scenes role in Nebraska homecoming
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The University of Nebraska's recent spring football game proved to be so much more than simply action on the gridiron. First National Bank had looked into the event to expand its reach in terms of marketing about ten years ago, and the annual results that the organization has received since then are evidence of the bank's success. However, it only took one strategic decision and a partnership with IMG College to pull off the greatest feat of First National Bank's tenure as the presenting sponsor of Nebraska football. The bank and IMG College collaborated and devised a plan to offer a few thousand free seats to active and former members of the military in order to attract a unique group of attendees. This idea soon transformed into an effort to set up a surprise reunion between Army Staff Sgt. Matthew Hawke and his family at midfield. After media networks such as ESPN and Big Ten Network caught wind of the heartwarming event, the attention that the University of Nebraska and First National Bank received in its wake was tremendous. Perhaps this nod to service and patriotism was even more memorable because of the fact that Sgt. Hawke was disguised as a member of the Cornhuskers football team. As stated in the article by IMG College's general manager of the Nebraska property, Brian George, "as we worked closely with the athletic department, putting him in a full Nebraska uniform and doing the tunnel walk with the team, it just became a little more unique."

As I examine the strategy used by both IMG College and First National Bank, I cannot help but admire the ingenuity behind such a simple concept. When a matchup is not as competitive as others (e.g., the NFL preseason or an NBA exhibition game), there has to be some incentive for fans to invest in the event. For Cornhuskers fans, it was the fact that they could preview their team for the upcoming season, and it was a great opportunity for families to bring their children to watch a football game because of the nature of the spectacle. What the consumers could not anticipate, however, was the surprise reunion that was organized by the two aforementioned partners. IMG College and First National Bank capitalized by catering the midfield revelation towards the fans in attendance, which included locals, families, and military personnel alike. A military reunion is a scene that almost everyone can sympathize with, so the fact that the event took place at midfield only added to the excitement and recognition that it received.

The "surprise military reunion" tactic has been used at a number of football games in the past – The University of South Carolina in 2012, The University of Florida in 2015, and Clemson University in 2016 among others – but it was the way in which IMG College and First National Bank directed such a spectacle towards a passionate and united audience that helped

this homecoming to earn so much praise. I applaud both sides of the effort for taking an ordinary idea and making it extraordinary, and I think more organizations should invest in fan engagement analytics in order to make similar decisions. IMG College may not have been considering the data and metrics side of promotions and events when planning the surprise reunion, but it would be smart if other companies adopted engagement measurement methods to devise similarly successful events.

If future collaborations between agencies and businesses are able to result in the kind of inspirational moment that was witnessed in Lincoln, Nebraska earlier this month, college football can truly make its mark on the community of sports fans that we have today. The power of human emotion can bring special memories to the world of sports, and Nebraska stopped nothing short of generating that powerful connection.