

A-State rugby program without a coach as off-field challenges increase

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The Arkansas State rugby program stands as one of the best programs in the country and now, unexpectedly, during a pandemic, the team is without its head coach.

The combination of the challenges that coronavirus presents with the fact that head coach Blake White left the team unexpectedly at the beginning of the semester created a deep chasm of problems for the team.

Being a club sport with not as much funding as other teams around campus already presented challenges to the program, but now doubled with the pandemic and no coach, the team has come together in an effort to push through.

"It hit kind of hard to be honest, the reality," player Dale Hartmann said. "Things haven't been going our way recently. Just adopting that mentality of, 'OK, it happened, it's all good, let's move on from it.'"

Moving On

For Hartmann, White's decision hit very close to home. White recruited Hartmann from South Africa.

"I know it wasn't easy but I was just constantly trying to remind myself what is the next option," Hartmann said. "I went up to him and said, 'I appreciate everything you've done for me.' It was just trying to see the positive side of things even though it wasn't necessarily a positive situation."

According to a few players on the team, White left for financial and family reasons.

Executive Director of Student Health and Wellness Matt Huckaby leads the search for A-State's new head coach. Huckaby's father's name, Curt Huckaby, graces A-State's rugby pitch as Curt founded the rugby program.

"It was completely supported and we really thank him for what he accomplished and what he brought to the program when he was here," Matt Huckaby said about White's departure. "I don't think anybody anticipated it but at the same time I'm not sure we were surprised just because of the environment, you know with COVID and everything."

Coaches come to the program and lay a brick in the foundation, then the next coach



Photo by: Krishnan Collins | Editor-in-Chief

The A-State rugby team is without a head coach after Blake White stepped down due to financial and family reasons, players said.

adds the next layer. Huckaby said White recruited well and created creative gameplans in his time at the helm.

For such a stellar program, coaches tend to only stay a few years in charge before passing the torch to someone else. Huckaby said coaching turnover happens across many programs and it is not just a problem A-State faces.

"The rugby coach position wears a lot of hats," Huckaby said. "You're the equipment manager, you're the head coach, the logistics manager, you do a lot in there. It's a cool position. I don't think (all those jobs) are a reason in itself for a turnover. My opinion is it's a good gig here. We're incredibly grateful to the university for funding us. When we first started it was all volunteer. Now we can pay a head coach to just do rugby all day long."

Resources

Hartmann said more resources should be given to the coach.

"The job does not pay enough for what is expected to be done," Hartmann said. "If you want to win a national championship, something like that has to improve."

Hartmann urged for a little more support from the school. Players around the team even took pitch maintenance into their own hands.

"We are looking after the pitch, literally," Hartmann said. "Me and a couple of the other boys were looking at the hose paths trying to fix them so we could water the grass. Luckily maintenance has come in and cut it and it's looking nice."

Huckaby noted every organization around campus would want more funding. Now in a more administrative role, Huckaby also knows what it was like to be on the touchline for the rugby program.

"It's kind of interesting, I used to be a rugby coach here," Huckaby said. "I'm on both sides. Like yes, we love all the funding we could get so let me be honest with that. Every program and every student organization would love more funding, I get it. I see both ways. Especially now with the administration, they're navigating some tough stuff right now, it's not an easy thing."

Huckaby also emphasized the hard work A-State's players are doing and their blue collar attitude.

The Coaching Search

According to Huckaby, the coaching search remains in its early stages and currently it's too early in the process to start discussing and narrowing down candidates.

COVID-19

In these tough times, individual accountability became essential and leaders around the team stepped up and took initiative.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the team cannot practice in groups and it's up to the individual players around the team to take weight training and fitness into their own hands.

"A lot of the youngsters are working hard now," Hartmann said. "We got a lot of guys putting their hands up saying, 'Look at me.' They're not necessarily saying that but you can see it. There's definitely a morale drop and a lot of confusion right now, I'm not going to lie, I'm going to be transparent."

The effort to workout and stay fit shows itself in different ways around the team.

Teammates cannot work out together in groups in the Red Wolf Center gym on campus due to pandemic restrictions, so a few of the players on the team invested in a membership at the Arkansas Muscle Gym off campus.

Even the shed at the rugby pitch has become a place to workout.

When coronavirus first showed its true colors back in March, the team invested money to bring more weights and a bench to the shed so players could have somewhere else to workout.

One of the freshmen on the team writes fitness programs for the team affectionately named, "The Fat Club."

"All the guys have a good attitude about (individual workouts)," team manager Winn Knight said. "A lot of the guys like the gym, that's usually not a problem. It sucks that we can't do it in a big group and push each other like we want to. But everyone's grinding and we'll be ready whenever

we get the green light."

Hartmann said he takes his hat off to the leaders around the team.

"The senior players have been immense in their resilience," Hartmann said. "I'm getting goosebumps right now. I know it sounds cliché, but it is what is, like the coach left and we are not allowed to train right now. What can we do to get better?"

Adversity

Team captain George Sharpe said the seniors around the team have a group message to communicate with each other.

"We just try to figure out and give positive support to the boys," Sharpe said. "That's all you can do at the moment. Just give them a bit of hope, especially the freshmen. We've got a young team, so it's important to let them know we're going to get through it."

Last season A-State took down Life, the No. 1 team in the country at the time and now the Red Wolves do not even have a coach. It creates a hardened mentality.

"We're saying we've been through enough together as a team, why can't we do it on our own?" Hartmann said. "It's not necessarily a negative mindset, it's more like if things go wrong, we'll find a way to do it."

Administrative tasks also lag behind in the program. Sharpe runs logistics and administrative duties while Hartmann and others also try to help out.

"We're looking at teams like Lindenwood and Life which are top class universities and competitors of ours and they're training right now," Hartmann

said. "We're in the process of getting every player registered again under USA Rugby with insurance. Usually we have these things done because we get into training immediately. Between me, George and coach Huckaby we're busy trying to get those things done."

Another player on the team, Vinny McGuire, has a brain tumour adding yet another layer of adversity the rugby team has to face together as a group.

The team got together in small groups and prayed for him along with signing a jersey and ball to send to him for support.

"He's one of our teammates, one of our brothers," Sharpe said. "It's important to make sure he still feels part of it. No matter what, COVID or not, we're going to be there for him."

Going Forward

To drive his teammates forward during these challenging times, Hartmann asks them why they come to Jonesboro, Arkansas.

This especially stands as an important question for international students on the team. They traveled a long way from home to come to A-State.

Hartmann said at the end of the day his teammates came here for two reasons, to play rugby and to take school seriously.

"When you're here, at least do it to the best of your ability," Hartmann said. "I must say the guys have been keeping focus on it."

With other programs around the country already back in training and a potential spring season on the cards, A-State rugby holds some kinks to fix.

"I know we don't have a coach right now but surely there should be a little bit more urgency," Hartmann said. "This is a potential national championship winning team. I just feel like there could be a bit more urgency."

Hartmann thanked the Jonesboro community and despite all the things not going the team's way, he expressed his gratitude to fans and sponsors and said the community drives the team forward to keep working hard.

"First and foremost," Hartmann said, "we owe it ourselves to be working hard right now and going forward, but I think we also owe it to the community."

"It hit kind of hard to be honest, the reality." - Hartmann

DIVERSITY, CONTINUED

"Sister II Sister is an organization for young Black women here on campus," McKinney said. "We just strive to uplift and support each other and make sure that everyone's maintaining good academic standards and striving for success in their college journey."

The organization has a mentor to mentee program where Sister II Sister pairs students with common interests and majors together.

"We do have a lot of members right now but we're always



Photo by: Krishnan Collins | Editor-in-Chief

Minority organizations set up tables outside the Student Union at the Diversity Fair on Tuesday, welcoming more as the semester goes on," McKinney said. "It's a really good opportunity to get involved in the mentoring

program we're doing right now. You get to meet so many different people and network with different women that have something in common with you."

Inez Cribbs, senior pre-professional biology major from Wynne, represented the Minority Association of Pre-Medical Students as the senior advisor at the Diversity Fair.

The organization's goal is to provide underrepresented pre-medical students with knowledge, skills and experience that are important

for professional development in the healthcare field. MAPS also wants to help minority matriculation into pre-health professions with an emphasis on medicine.

"(It's important) especially right now because of things like the Black Lives Matter Movement going on we need more minorities in the healthcare profession," Cribbs said. "I just feel like we need an increase in all minorities in general."

Corrections

The Herald Sept. 30

In the Sept. 30 story, "Jonesboro's underdog rises," the correct way to spell the name in the story is Jonathan Adams Jr.

The Herald Sept. 30

In the Sept. 30 story, "Sodoma's record breaking story," Sodoma broke A-State's all time leading goal scoring record in a match against Louisiana.