

# LC athletics try not to do less with less

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BAYTOWN - For the second year in a row, big changes are on tap for Lee College coaches and players during the upcoming season.

While last year's changes revolved around the euphoria of opening new facilities, this year's changes involve adjusting and adapting to the effects of campus wide budget cuts, which will slice about 33 percent of the athletic department's funding starting Sept. 1. The cuts are part of Lee College's overall plan to address drastic reductions in the amount of funding it will receive from Austin this year. The effects of the cuts are already resonating throughout the department.

"Any time you lose a third of your budget it's going to affect the quality of your program," said Jason Haynes, Lee College tennis coach. "Cut a third out of anything, and you're going to notice it."

Among other things, the cuts put a moratorium on out-of-state travel for games and recruiting visits and reduce the monies available for scholarships and player stipends. While the cuts are vast in scope, the advance notice of the pending budget cutbacks has given the department a little time to save what it can for the rainy days ahead.

"We won't see the major effects of the cuts until the new budget year begins," said Karen Guthmiller, Lee College athletic director. "Until then, we are trying to back fill the money we are set to lose through fund-raising efforts over the summer."

Failure to do so could have grave consequences for the program.

"If we don't meet our fund-raising goals, we will face even more cuts than we are facing now," Guthmiller said.

To help fill some of the funding gaps left by the cuts, a greater urgency has been placed on making a profit through gate receipts, summer camps and other fund-raising efforts, including selling signage and naming rights for Lee College's athletic facilities.

"We have had some really good meetings to find creative ways to increase our revenue and move toward being more self-sufficient," Guthmiller said.

Another avenue where the program hopes to increase revenue is from season ticket and concession sales at home athletic events in the college's new facilities.

"We need the support of the fans to attend games," said Roy Champagne Runnin' Rebels basketball coach. "We really offer a lot of bang for the buck through a variety of ticket packages. Some of the packages even include valet parking."

As the department and college look for alternative revenue sources, coaches already are changing the way they do business in preparation of the cuts.

In terms of recruiting players, the process is not as face-to-face as it once was as a result of the travel restrictions.

“The cuts on travel limit the opportunity coaches have to evaluate talent in person,” Guthmiller said. “As a result, coaches will rely more on videotapes and on campus tryouts to evaluate out of state recruits. We are definitely going to look at every way we can stretch our recruiting dollars.”

Teams also are looking at a reduction in the time they have to sign players.

“I couldn’t sign anyone until February,” said Tracie Johnson, Lady Rebels volleyball coach. “Usually, I start my recruiting in November and am finished by January. This year I am still trying to fill my roster.”

The later recruiting start also affected which players signed with the Lady Rebels.

“I lost a couple of good recruits as a result of the delay,” Johnson said. “They kept wondering why I wasn’t offering them a scholarship yet and finally they got tired of waiting and signed with another school.”

Recruiting efforts for the Rebels tennis team, known for its mix of international and homegrown talent, also have been grounded by the cuts.

“I can’t make as many recruiting visits as I used to make,” Haynes said. “I am relying more on letters and e-mail to stay in touch with recruiting prospects.”

For the Runnin' Rebels basketball team, recruiting under the new guidelines involves connecting with recruits with the help of their friends at AT& T.

“We are using a lot of e-mail and phone calls to stay in touch with out-of-state recruits,” Champagne said.

Another challenge facing Lee College coaches as a result of the restriction on travel is a change in where they can play.

Prior to the travel moratorium, Lee College teams traditionally played one or two tournaments out of state each year during the regular season.

According to Guthmiller, the trips out of state serve a dual role for the teams.

“Out of state trips are a great way to attract athletes to our programs,” Guthmiller said. “They also serve as a great opportunity to prepare our teams to compete at a higher level and keep a competitive edge over our conference opponents.”

As a result of team travel being limited to Texas, Champagne agrees that this year's team will miss out on a valuable experience that past players enjoyed.

"We looked at the tournaments out of state as an educational opportunity for the players. Some of my players had never even left the state, and we were able to take them to tournaments to play against some of the best teams in the nation," Champagne said.

While the conference schedule will not be affected by travel restrictions, the list of potential non-conference opponents is decidedly shorter than it has been in past seasons.

"It is really hard to schedule eight quality games at the same time every other school in Texas is trying to find eight games of their own," Champagne said. "We try to schedule nonconference games that will prepare our players for postseason play. As such, I want to schedule the best teams I can. I don't want to play pushovers. I want to play teams that will challenge us and make us a stronger team."

Last season, the Runnin' Rebels' schedule was ranked as the fifth toughest in the nation and included trips to Missouri, Kansas and Louisiana.

"We won't have that tough of a schedule this year," Champagne said.

Another team feeling the effects of a diminished opponent pool and traveling restrictions is the Lady Rebels volleyball team, which last year traveled to Illinois, Florida and Missouri. "Our schedule is dramatically different this year. We cut 10 to 15 matches from our schedule," Johnson said.

Aside from a drastically shorter schedule, Johnson feels the cut in the number of scheduled matches will have far-reaching implications on the squad's postseason play.

"Besides our conference matches, the out-of-state trips are the most important part of our schedule," Johnson said. "Traveling to tournaments allows us to face tougher competition and prepares us for nationals."

Historically, the Lady Rebels started the season at a tournament in Illinois that helped establish the rankings for the season. Without the warm-up tournaments, Johnson fears her team, ranked no lower than third in the nation the past two seasons, may be in for an uphill climb.

"Our past history will only help us for so long, Johnson said. "If we can't play against the top teams, we will not be ranked as high at nationals."

Teams also use out of state tournaments as a chance to expose players to coaches and scouts from universities from across the country. Without the trips, the scholarship options narrow.

"The exposure and scholarship offers our players receive will be greatly affected by these cuts," Johnson said. "That exposure at tournaments led to university scholarships and a chance for our players to continue their athletic and academic careers."

While the ban on out of state travel was implemented in an effort to save money, it may fail to accomplish that goal as teams are forced to travel further west and take more flights to get to games,

“Even though we are confined. to the state, we may not be able to save money," Champagne said. "It is just as expensive to travel to West Plains, Mo., as it is to go play in Midland and Big Spring."

The travel limitations have caused coaches to get creative in finding opponents to play. One such technique Lee College is entertaining is the “pay them and they will come” approach to scheduling.

“Since we can’t go out of state to play, we are looking at ways to attract more schools to come to us,” Guthmiller said. “One of the ideas we are exploring is offering more financial incentives and guarantees for teams that come to play at Lee College.”

According to Guthmiller, one incentive being looked at is assisting schools by paying for part of their lodging when they play at Lee College.

Haynes has taken another direction with filling out the tennis team's schedule.

“Since we don’t have as many conference opponents, we are adding some more scrimmages against universities, including the University of Texas,” Haynes said. “Besides trying to schedule more home matches, we also are looking at cutting expenses when we travel by changing where we stay and what we eat.”

While all three Lee College teams have had to adjust their regular season agendas, postseason play may see the biggest change. Teams that qualify for the national tournaments of their sports will be responsible for raising funds to cover the cost of their trips.

Funds for national tournament appearances had previously come from the Lee College President’s Office.

Recruiting and scheduling aren’t the only areas that are facing big changes this season. Lee College athletic teams must also do more with less money for the athletes. The overall scholarship fund was reduced by \$100,000, and player stipends also were reduced as part of the cost saving measures.

“We have always prided ourselves on offering our students amenities that other schools didn't provide,” Champagne said. “With the cuts, we still are offering a quality education, but the individual amenities for the players that set us apart from other schools are not as big as they once were. Now, instead of setting the standard we are pretty much even with what other schools are offering.”

Champagne isn’t alone in feeling the department is heading in the wrong direction as a result of the budget cuts.

“These cuts have brought us dangerously close to spoiling what we have worked so hard to build,” Haynes said. “The goal when I got here was to spare no cost at being the best. I don’t think that is the case anymore here and at quite a few other schools in the area. Funding for athletics just doesn’t seem to be as high of a priority as it once was.”

Johnson has seen a lot of changes during her tenure at Lee College; however, this may be the toughest challenge she has encountered.

“I understand why we’re making these cuts and am very thankful to still have a job,” Johnson said. “With that said, coaches are very competitive by nature, and it is very hard to be competitive with less resources. It really makes my job a lot harder.”

While his program is still better off financially than it was when he started at Lee College eight years ago, Champagne is concerned about the direction his team’s finances are heading.

“The cuts are kind of scary. Money keeps the machine going, and we need money,” Champagne said. “It is very disheartening to build up the funding of a program and then see parts of it disappear. You hope that the cuts are just temporary, but there is always a fear that you won’t get the funding back.”

While Champagne is “disheartened” at the prospect of trying to do more with less, he knows the cuts are part of a bigger picture and a necessary evil.

“The administration has worked very hard to keep our program as nationally competitive as possible,” Champagne said. “We just have to figure out how to work with less money just like everyone else at the college is having to do.”

While the Lee College players and coaches will be working to do more with less, according to Guthmiller, it is a task they are more than equipped to handle.

“People who are involved in athletics are resilient,” Guthmiller said. “They always have to find a way to succeed with whatever resources they have, whether it be players or budget. We are equipped to meet these challenges with the budget. We know what we need to do, and we are acting accordingly.”