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SMC athletics confronts coronavirus



Photo provided

From left: Paul Thomas, SMC women's basketball head coach, and Mike Matoso
By Jon Kingdon

With the onset of the coronavirus in March, with all its debilitating effects, we now find the fall sports season inexorably approaching.

Everyone has their individual concerns: the coaches are concerned with their particular team, the players are concerned with their playing status, the trainers with the health of the players, the academic advisors with the eligibility of the players and the fans are anxiously awaiting to begin rooting again for their favorite teams. However, at every high school and college, there is one person that is required to take all of this under consideration – the athletic director.

Mike Matoso is entering his fourth year at Saint Mary's College and his second as the

Vice President for Intercollegiate Athletics. In this role, he oversees the entire athletic department which entails seven men's and nine women's teams, nine different departments, 87 individuals listed in the athletic directory and about 275 student-athletes.

When the effect of the coronavirus came to the fore, Matoso's short-term concern was for the Saint Mary's men's basketball team which was waiting to hear where they would be seeded in the upcoming National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament: "It was three days before the show. After winning four of our last five games, we knew that we were going to be in the tournament. When you've already gone to the tournament, you know how much fun it is, it's a celebration which you all get to enjoy

and to have that taken so abruptly, particularly for the seniors, it was very difficult."

It soon became clear to everyone that this was not going to be a problem that was going to go away quickly.

As the in-person classes at Saint Mary's were closing, it was a major adjustment for Matoso and the athletic department: "You're talking to kids that were four weeks into their season with championships two months out so at that point, you really start to grasp the depth of this entire situation. Everything was a process, from locking up all of our facilities to making the decision to send our students home."

There was no institution in the country that was fully prepared for this pandemic. For Matoso, it was one challenge after another: "I equate it to surfing where you get hit by a wave and you get pulled under and you don't know which way is up and you get your head above water and then the next wave comes and hits you and knocks you back down. It was like that the first four to six weeks where every day something new was coming at you that you just weren't prepared for and you had to adjust and you had to make a pivot."

As with every other department at the various colleges and universities, the athletic departments have taken a hit to their budgets. Around the country, at Division I, II and III schools, there have been over 100 sports teams that have been eliminated due to budgetary concerns.

Though Saint Mary's has also taken a financial hit, there are no plans to eliminate any of the sports teams. "Luckily, we're a lean, small department," said Matoso. "From a staffing standpoint to a student athlete standpoint, with the sports that we sponsor, we're in an ideal situation so it would make no sense to consider dropping any of our sports. There is nothing on the table for dropping any sports."

With the cancellation of

spring sports, the NCAA Division I Council Coordination Committee voted to grant spring athletes an extra year of eligibility. Saint Mary's had 28 seniors that had the opportunity to return to school and compete again in the 2021 spring season. With some of the athletes going to play professionally, some of the foreign students remaining home and others who already had jobs, there are only 12 student-athletes that are taking the opportunity to return to campus and their respective teams. "Out of our current scholarship allotment, we funded the 12 scholarships through merit savings of the entire student-athlete population. We're happy that we were able to figure it out."

The department has taken a big hit financially, having lost almost 70% of their distribution from the NCAA. Under Matoso, Saint Mary's has completed several major facility enhancements, including an \$8 million remodel of University Credit Union Pavilion and the completion of a brand new \$2.3 million strength and conditioning training center and weight room in the summer of 2020, along with a new indoor hitting facility at the baseball complex and a second on-campus beach volleyball court.

At this point, many of the athletic department's projects have been put on the back burner, says Matoso: "We're trying to be really respectful with our donors, knowing that everyone is going through a tough time right now."

There were normally nine

teams at Saint Mary's that sponsor sports camps, which run through the beginning of August. All were canceled. "It was a tough decision, but our No. 1 goal is getting our kids back," said Matoso. "When you look at the restrictions in what we could do, it just didn't make any sense to bring a limited number of kids back to our campus. Under these conditions, the camps would not have been much fun."

Saint Mary's is not operating in a vacuum. The West Coast Conference is one where all of the schools are very similar in size (except for BYU) and philosophy and are all working together, sharing ideas as to how to best handle this crisis, says Matoso: "I have a weekly call every Tuesday with all 10 athletic directors. The more we help each other and get our teams back out on the field to play, the better it's going to be for all of us."

With 49 international student-athletes, there are many more factors that have to be addressed as they attempt to return to the school from overseas: "For these students, we need to look at it from an institutional standpoint, a county standpoint, a state and federal standpoint and in some cases, an international standpoint," said Matoso. "There are some countries where those kids are going to have to fly into another country and quarantine for 14 days before they can come into the country and then will have to quarantine here for 14 days before they can return to campus."

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