

LAREDO MORNING TIMES



TAMU'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY

PART 8 OF 12: ATHLETICS HISTORY 1 OF 2

TAMIU 50th Anniversary

TAMIU's 50th anniversary History of TAMIU athletics (Part 1 of 2)



Courtesy of Andrea Arias

The TAMIU men's soccer team has a school-best .573 win percentage in its 18-year history.

By Zach Davis
Laredo Morning Times

As Texas A&M International celebrates its 50th anniversary, its athletics program has seen plenty of ups and downs since its first team took the field nearly two decades ago. In its 19 years, TAMIU's 11 programs have played in a combined three conferences, won 15 league championships, had 10 All-Americans and secured four NCAA team tournament appearances along with two more of the individual variety.

TAMIU's first programs began in 2002 with cross country, volleyball and men's and women's soccer starting off play in the Red River Athletic Conference out of the NAIA before men's and women's basketball kicked things off a year later in 2013-14. The school made the jump to the NCAA at the Division II level in 2006, and the next two seasons play began with baseball and softball starting as well as golf. Their DII teams played in the Heartland Conference up until joining the Lone Star Conference for the 2019-20 campaign, which saw its spring sports' seasons canceled mid-season due to the nationwide coronavirus pandemic.

The school's coaching staff is a mix of veterans and newcom-

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ers. Baseball, softball, cross country, golf and soccer have their longest tenured leaders in their respective programs' histories, while men's and women's basketball, women's soccer and volleyball all have coaches that are either one year on the job or newly hired.

"We have made numerous strides and improvements that I am extremely proud of," TAMIU athletic director Griz Zimmermann said. "The four primary pillars of any athletics program – operations, salaries, facilities and scholarships – will determine the level of success for the department. We have been blessed with building quality in all four.

"The most important one, athletic scholarships, provides each coach the ability to build a competitive team to challenge the other members of the Lone Star Conference. We have been able to fully fund each team with the maximum scholarships to put their teams together. This was done in the past few years, and we are already seeing the benefits in numerous sports, it will be only a matter of time before all our sports will be competing in the upper echelon of the conference standings. I'm very proud of the effort of all our coaches and staff as we continue to build and guide our department and programs for the future."

MEN'S SOCCER

TAMIU got its start in ath-



Courtesy of Andrea Arias

TAMIU head coach Claudio Arias has led the men's soccer team since 2004 and has been a part of five of the program's seven league titles.

letics in 2002 with fantastic results. In the school's first ever game, the men's soccer team hosted Wiley College at home on Aug. 30, 2002 and rolled to a 7-1 victory in front of 340 fans. That team put together an impressive first season, posting an above .500 record at 9-8-2, and it set the stage for the most successful program in the school's history to show what it was capable of.

The very next season, TAMIU rolled to a 17-5 record while winning all eight league games and finishing as regional semi-finalists. The school also won its first

two titles, claiming the regular-season and tournament championships in the Red River Athletic Conference.

The program was captained by Lance Noble (26-13-2) in the opening two years, but he left to pursue his Master of Science in Sports Management at the United States Sports Academy. In his place stepped Claudio Arias, who has become the longest-tenured and most successful coach in the school's history.

Arias kept things rolling his first season capturing the RRAC regular-season and tournament titles in 2004,

and he's been with the team ever since. Overall, Arias has led the Dustdevils for 16 seasons, compiling a .561 winning percentage (148-113-26) and leading the program to five of its seven overall championships. The sport's .573 overall win percentage is better than any other TAMIU athletic program, with no other one even above .400.

Arias won the regular-season title in the Heartland Conference in 2010, 2011 and 2013, and he was the league's Coach of the Year twice. Arias also finished runner up for a tournament

title three times. That included 2019, as Arias guided TAMIU to a 12-7-1 record before losing in the Lone Star Conference championship game in the school's first season in the conference.

While the 2019 team came up a game short, they did reach new heights as the program received an NCAA tournament bid for the first time.

"I have been here with my family 16 years," Arias said. "At the end of the day, you are left with the stories of the people you coach, the people that you stay in touch with and the lives you change

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through athletics. You can't change everybody, but our graduation rate is very good, and we've won several conference titles."

In its history, TAMIU has had two conference Players of the Year in Greg Mulamba (2008) and Emmanuel Frias (2011) – the former was also an NSCAA DII All-Midwest honoree – and two Offensive Players of the Year in Albert Escovar (2008) and Diego Manzano-Cano (2013). They also had three NAIA All-Americans from their time in the RRAC in Rudy Chacon and Jesus Sanchez in 2003 and Daniel Hermosillo in 2004.

On 2019's squad, Nadav Datner won the Lone Star's Forward of the Year award.

TAMIU men's soccer also has the most extensive list of first-team All-Conference performers of any of the school's programs. Its individuals have been honored 43 times and in all but one of their 19 years. Hermosillo was the only player to win it in four seasons from 2002-05 while the school's two-time winners include Sanchez (2003-04), Mulamba (2007-08), Roy Hernandez (2008-09), Luis Salas (2010-11), Manzano-Cano (2011-12), Adan Villavicencio

(2011-12), Joan Vallejo (2011-12), Jovany Macias (2011, 2014) and Ryan Hodgson (2013, 2016).

"For being a young program, it's moving forward," Arias said. "One of the biggest differences is we are creating culture. Kids are identifying with our jersey and our university. Now the kids put the uniform on and really feel like they are a part of this. It took us a while to create that culture, but I think it has to do with consistency."

WOMEN'S SOCCER

The men's soccer team wasn't the

only program to take the field on the school's first day of history in 2002. The women's soccer team did the same – albeit on the road – but their results that day and the rest of the season weren't as fruitful. The group lost 6-0 at Texas Lutheran and stumbled to a 3-16 campaign which featured a pair of 9-0 defeats.

The team rebounded with a 9-9-2 season before falling to 4-15 the next year in the final year for head coach Sarah Forestier (16-40-2). Anna Girdwood (14-73-4) took the team over and guided them to their first league tournament champion-



Courtesy of Andrea Arias

The TAMIU men's soccer team clinched its first NCAA Tournament appearance in 2019.

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ship game in their final season in the RRAC, losing 5-1 to Northwood in 2005. She led the team into Division II staying with the program the next four seasons, but after racking up only one win her last two years, the school turned to a familiar face.

In 2010, Arias began pulling double duty as he took over the women's soccer team along with the men's. And soon after, he took them to their two most successful seasons in DII. Arias' group finished 11-7-1 in 2012 and 7-7-3 in 2014, securing their only two trips ever to the Heartland Conference tournament. They were shut out each time by Dallas Baptist in the opening round.

Arias' last season was 2015 when the injury-riddled group went 2-13-2, finishing his six-year stint at 28-68-7. And deciding to refocus on just one sport, he handed the reins over to a man he was very familiar with – his brother.

Felipe Arias, who served previously as Claudio's assistant coach on both the men's and women's teams, took over and saw his team's win totals slightly increase during each of his first three years before a 2-13-2 campaign in 2019, finishing his run at 10-53-5. He stepped down to pursue other career opportunities outside of collegiate athletics.

Jon Hussak was hired in the off-season to lead the program into 2020's fall start. He has a decade of experience and was most recently an assistant coach at West Florida.

"I congratulate TAMIU for its 50th anniversary celebration as well as (President Dr. Pablo) Arenaz and all the people that make TAMIU an outstanding university," Felipe Arias said. "I had a great experience while coaching alongside phenomenal professionals."



Photo by Danny Zaragoza / Laredo Morning Times

TAMIU's all-time leading scorer Cio Bargallo in 2018.

While the group never turned the corner under Felipe Arias, he was able to coach the best player the program has ever seen in Cio Bargallo. The Blanes, Spain native set the school's career goals record with 32 during her first three seasons. She left after her junior year after exhausting her eligibility due to playing earlier in her career in Spain.

Bargallo was a three-time All-Con-



Upcoming Schedule

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| Celebration of Life | Canceled |
| TAMIU Planetarium 15th anniversary | Pending |
| Trailblazer Tower Dedication | Pending |
| 25th annual University Life Awards | Canceled |
| Sixth annual International Mariachi Festival | Postponed |
| Ring Ceremony | Postponed |
| 2045 Dinner | May 2020* |
| Pre-Commencement Ceremonies | Postponed |
| Commencement | Postponed |
| TAMIU Enrichment Day | May 21 |
| TAMIU 50th Birthday Bash/Founders Day | Sept. 202 |

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Photo by Cuate Santos / Laredo Morning Times

The Heartland Conference's 2012 Setter of the Year in TAMIU's Daria Winckler in 2011.

ference player but only earned first-team honors once in 2017, also earning first-team honors for the region the same year. She is one of four players in school history to be on a conference first-team list including Heather Pace in 2004 and Karina Garcia and Valeria Jaramillo in 2012.

VOLLEYBALL

TAMIU volleyball was the next sport to start in 2002 as the school had a stacked fall slate early on. And right out of the gate, it looked like that may have been the program that was going to carry the flag for the school in athletics. Instead, it's struggled since its NAIA beginning.

TAMIU volleyball didn't just win its first game of all-time in straight sets on Aug. 31, 2002 at Sul Ross State, it actually kicked off its existence winning its first seven games and 21 of its first 22. Captained by head coach Albino "Binny" Canales, the group put together an impressive 23-6 inaugural season.

Overall, Canales led the school to an impressive 92-35 record in his four seasons after coming to TAMIU from nearby Laredo College – the best overall win percentage from any coach in school history. However, he rejoined the Palominos in 2006 prior to TAMIU jumping up to the NCAA's Division II level.

"My time at TAMIU was very special with a talented staff who I still call my friends," Canales said. "I still look at my teams' players and assistant coaches there as an inspiration that helped me grow as a coach. Many have also become coaches, and I find myself having conversations with them about current teams."

Canales' loss proved to be a hurdle the program has yet to be able

to recover from. Over the following 14 seasons, the school has only had two winning seasons, and one was the first year Canales was gone as Wendy McManus was 24-5 in 2006 before finishing her five years with a 48-100 record.

Other coaches over that time included Al Givens (14-18) in 2011 – who won the Heartland's Coach of the Year award – Marlon Sano (23-57) from 2012-14, Susie Jangada (18-81) from 2015-18 and Brittany Harry (6-19) in 2019.

Another former LC coach, Harry's six-win campaign this past season was their most since 2015 as she leads the way into 2020 trying to get the Dustdevils into the conference tournament for the first time since 2012.

In 2005, Xochitl Garza earned the school's lone All-American nod in the NAIA. Daria Winckler won Heartland Conference Setter of the Year honors in 2012.

MEN'S AND WOMEN'S CROSS COUNTRY

The TAMIU cross country teams kicked off a year later in 2003. But they quickly became relevant in the conference as both the men's and women's teams took second in both 2003 and 2004, and each had representatives in the NAIA Championships in two separate years before heading to DII in 2006.

Coming over as a coach at United Middle School and Memorial Middle School, Benny Rodriguez took over as head coach for both the men's and women's teams in 2005 at TAMIU and has been a staple of the program ever since.

"I've been fortunate to work with a university that supports our pro-

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gram,” Rodriguez said. “Coaching here at TAMIU has allowed me to grow as a coach. It has taught me that it’s not about what you know but how you connect and execute a mission with your student athletes.”

After jumping to NCAA play, the men earned a top-five league finish in their first seven seasons after becoming eligible in 2007 – taking fifth six times and as high as second in 2011 – and qualified for the South Central Regionals three times. They’ve had one top-five finish the past four years, however, including

taking ninth their first year in the Lone Star Conference.

The program has had two players in history receive All-Region honors as Eddie Gonzalez and Mark Vela were awarded in 2005. Vela (2003-05) is the school’s lone three-time All-Conference winner while Gonzalez (2005, 2007), Artemio Romero (2010-11) and Roger Ruelweler (2011-12) each have been honored by either the RRAC or Heartland twice.

Meanwhile, the women’s team has eight top-five finishes in 13 seasons

at the DII level. That included a streak of five straight before taking 14th in their first year in the LSC. They also have had three trips to the South Central Regionals as a team while being represented two times by an individual at the NCAA tournament.

That performer was a local in Rebekah Hernandez, who made her mark as the top athlete in program history. Hernandez earned the school’s lone NCAA trips in



Courtesy of TAMIU

Rebekah Hernandez, left, and TAMIU head coach Benny Rodriguez, right, pictured with Alex Rodriguez, in 2017.

2014 and 2017 while also being the only player to be named All-Region three times as well as All-Conference on four occasions.

Anetra Matthews also represented the school twice at the NAIA National Championships in 2004-05. Matthews (2004-05) and Marlene Gutierrez (2008-09) are the only other multiple All-Region honorees. Matthews (2003-05) and Gutierrez (2008-10) are also three-time All-Conference players while Crystal Dickinson (2010-11) was honored twice.

“Over the years, we have had tremendous growth in our sport,” Rodriguez said. “We recruit athletes that are open to change, and when they do, the sky is the limit, which allows us to be successful year in and out.”



Courtesy of TAMIU

Laredoan Rebekah Hernandez was TAMIU’s only NCAA tournament representative in school history, making the trip twice.

For more information on TAMIU’s 50th anniversary, follow TXAMIU on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and Spotify, use the hashtag #TAMIU50 and visit the school’s website at 50.tamiau.edu.

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Your story is our story – and now it’s time to share that story! We’re inviting individuals who have been impacted by the University to share a memory or moment that’s forever changed their lives.

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WE'RE **TAMIU** TOGETHER WE'RE **LAREDO** TOGETHER

TAMIU and our world have been dealt a blow and COVID-19 has prompted some tough decisions and changes. In this, our 50th Anniversary year, we've reimagined higher education for the immediate future, moving our classrooms into the Virtual Environment.

Our TAMIU faculty and staff are standing side by side with our students and community, providing virtual services and support that brings us as close as the palm of your hand.

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Registration is now underway for Maymester, Summer and Fall.

Learn more about our future together at
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