

# TAMIU'S 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

PART 9 OF 12: ATHLETICS HISTORY 2 OF 2



## TAMIU 50th Anniversary

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



Courtesy of TAMIU

TAMIU men's basketball celebrates its 2013-14 Heartland Conference championship in Arkansas, one of five head coach Bryan Weakley, left, was a part of.

**By Zach Davis**  
**Laredo Morning Times**

**T**exas A&M International is celebrating its 50th anniversary, and its athletics program is one of the many areas that has seen tremendous growth over the years.

During our first look at the history of TAMIU athletics, LMT chronicled the school's first programs: men's and women's soc-

cer, volleyball and cross country. The men's soccer team is TAMIU's most successful program in history, and it and cross country have mainstays at the top coached by the longest tenured leaders the school has seen in Claudio Arias (16 seasons) and Benny Rodriguez (13 seasons), respectively. Meanwhile, the women's soccer and volleyball programs will be guided next year by brand new coaches.

All four programs were formed in 2002 or 2003, but this around, we will take a look at some that began

a few years later. TAMIU hit the hardwood for the first time during the 2003-04 season with men's and women's basketball before men's and women's golf, baseball and softball all followed before 2008. And like those previously discussed programs, it's another mix at the top with head coaches who are either relative newcomers or their program's longest-tenured leaders.

### **MEN'S BASKETBALL**

A year after introducing four fall sports, TAMIU made way for two

new major programs over the winter and spring seasons of 2003-04 on the hardwood with their men's and women's basketball teams.

The Dustdevils men's squad won its first-ever game in dramatic fashion with an 80-78 victory over Monterey Tech on Nov. 3, 2003 in front of 1,000 fans – the highest attendance at that point to a TAMIU athletic event in history. Unfortunately, that year's group struggled as it had to win six of its final nine games just to get double-digit victories at 10-22. That was the first year under

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head coach Tarvish Felton (28-64), who coached all three years for the program in the NAIA. He is currently the assistant coach at Division I Fresno State.

After that, the group had some serious bumps in the road as it broke into Division II. Curtis Condie helped the program recover from a four-win campaign as the team went 12-15 during the 2006-07 season, but he then left for DI Louisiana Tech. And Stephone Leary took over guiding the team to a 10-16 year in 2007-08 and a 9-18 season in 2008-09, but the latter was wiped out completely as the program had to forfeit its entire season due to playing ineligible players.

Fortunately at its low point, the school made a decision that turned around its next decade. TAMIU hired the duo of head coach Shane Rinner and associate coach Bryan Weakley as both came from Alaska Anchorage. They took the team to 12 wins their first season before guiding the program to a regular-season and tournament title in 2010-11 and another regular-season championship in 2011-12 – with Rinner winning the Heartland's Coach of the Year in the latter.

Rinner (54-33) moved on after his third year, and Weakley stepped in to become the winningest coach in program history over his next six years. Weakley (98-



Courtesy of TAMIU

The 2011-12 Heartland Conference Player of the Year Evan Matteson.

76) went on to claim two more league titles of his own, giving him a hand in all five of the school's championships in its history.

"The TAMIU and the Laredo community helped change my life. They helped me grow up as a young inexperienced coach to a seasoned one," Weakley said. "The accomplishments that we achieved were very special because in the beginning as the associate head coach. I did it with one of my best

all-time friends and mentors Shane Rinner. The championship memories we shared together along with our great players were priceless and deeply meaningful."

Weakley stepped down prior to the 2018-19 campaign citing health concerns, and associate coach Joel Taylor took over. But Taylor's squad went just 6-21, and after starting 2019-20 at 2-11, Taylor (8-32) was removed from the position. Assistant coach Jeremy Es-

pinoza took over on an interim basis as the team finished the campaign losing 14 of 15 ending their worst season in history at 3-25.

Those struggles led to the hiring of Ronnie "Mac" McConnell this offseason. He has nearly two decades of experience coaching with the past three seasons serving as the associate head coach of fellow Lone Star opponent Tarleton State.

Evan Matteson is the lone Dustdevil to win the Heart-

land's greatest individual honor as he took home the Player of the Year award in 2011-12. Jordan Clark earned Defensive Player of the Year honors in 2013-14. Previous first-team All-Heartland Conference honorees included Will Faiivae in 2010-11, Matteson and Ryan McLucas in 2011-12, Matthew Culliver in 2013-14, and Denzel Bellot in 2016-17.

"Every coach knows it's really the players that get it

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done,” Weakley said. “The TAMIU student-athletes were the ones that sacrificed in practice, made the in-game plays and gave up a lot of their college experience to accomplish something special.”

### WOMEN’S BASKETBALL

TAMIU women’s basketball has been defined by change as it’s seen the most coaching turnover of any of the school’s programs with six leaders in 17 years, and none lasting more than four seasons.

Marc Garcia led the team’s inaugural season opening with a close 72-71 loss to Monterrey Tech in front of 800 fans on Nov. 3, 2003. The team went 14-20 that campaign and lost in the RRAC semifinals. Garcia (52-44) led the way three years and picked up a RRAC Coach of the Year award in 2005 before the school’s move to the DII level. Darrell Vincent (32-45) and David Beaver (23-59) also coached three seasons apiece before Michelle Bento-Jackson – a former Division I coach at Santa Clara – took over during the 2012-13 campaign.

Bento-Jackson led the team to new heights its second season with its first title, claiming the Heartland’s regular-season crown after a 19-9 record and earning Coach of the Year honors. Her three seasons recording at least a .500 record is the most in program history.

“We literally turned a program completely around and made history, which will always be very special to me,” Bento-Jackson said. “We created a culture that was about discipline in all areas and about hard work. In order to do this successfully, you have to have the right players. I owe everything to my players. I had an



Courtesy of TAMIU

TAMIU head coach Michelle Bento-Jackson guided the women’s basketball program to its first conference title in 2013-14.

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extraordinary group who bought in to do whatever necessary to win. They were committed and such a joy to coach.

“I am very thankful for my time at TAMIU. I worked with great people. I was fortunate to coach wonderful young women, and the community was so welcoming to my family and I. ... I miss everyone in Laredo and the TAMIU campus, and I wish them nothing but the best.”

When Bento-Jackson (57-50) left after her fourth campaign, however, the program couldn't keep up the momentum. Jeff Caha (4-57) was hired and coached the next three years as the team was a combined 5-78 over that span. He didn't finish the schedule in either of his last two campaigns – in 2017-18 due to an investigation he was cleared from any wrongdoing in, and in 2018-19 due to being let go – as two-time interim coach Tori Tucker (1-21) finished both seasons.

Coming off a winless 0-27 slate in 2018-19, Nate Vogel took over in 2019 with plenty of work to do. And the former Miles Community College coach had a respectable debut in the Lone Star Conference going 11-17, but they just missed qualifying for the conference tournament.

Individually, Vanessa Villarreal was the school's lone four-time first-team All-Conference performer from 2003-06. The only other multi-winner was Laredoan Jessica Prieto in 2014-15 and 2015-16. Jasmine June (2008-09), Mary Tobias (2008-09), Malika Jackson (2013-14) and Keiona Mathews (2015-16) each won the honor once.

Villarreal (2003-05) was also a three-time NAIA All-American while Jackson (2013-14), Mathews (2015-16) and Prieto (2015-16) were



Courtesy of TAMIU

The 2015-16 men's golf squad coached by Rudy Gonzalez, far right.

each named WBCA All-American honorable mentions once. Other major award winners in the program's history include Krystal Manning and Alexis Thomas winning Defensive Player of the Year in 2008-09 and 2013-14, respectively.

## MEN'S AND WOMEN'S GOLF

Two more TAMIU programs come from the links with men's and women's golf. The university has no year-by-year records available for its programs.

The Heartland Conference lists the men's team beginning in 2006-07 and taking eighth place before taking the next year off and returning in 2008-09. The group cracked

the top-five with a fifth-place conference finish in 2013-14 and had their highest overall finish in 2016-17 at third place.

The women's team was recorded for the first time by the Heartland Conference in 2008-09 taking sixth place – a spot they took in seven of their first eight seasons. Sixth is also the highest overall league finish for the team.

Both squads' 2019-20 seasons were canceled due to the coronavirus.

The TAMIU men have had two players earn an All-Conference honor in its history as Parker Holekamp won first-team honors in 2018-19 and Andrew Ritchot was a second-

team performer in 2011-12. On the women's side, Taminie Panich is the lone All-Conference honoree being selected to the first-team in 2011-12.

The teams are guided by Rudy Gonzalez, who was a successful local professional junior golf instructor prior to his hire. After five seasons, Gonzalez helped each program improve as he was named the Heartland's Coach of the Year on the men's side in 2016-17.

Over the years, Gonzalez has helped both programs pick up their first tournament wins and saw the men qualify for their first appearance in a NCAA West/South Central Super Regional. Individually, he also guided Holekamp as he

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Photo by Cuate Santos / Laredo Morning Times

Ryan Flynn, TAMIU baseball's current head coach and former star player, was elected into the Heartland Conference Hall of Fame in 2016.

won the 2019 Jack Brown Memorial Invitational and made two consecutive U.S. Amateur tournaments, and he helped Santiago Garcia win the school's only individual award with Freshman of the Year honors in 2018-19.

"My passion has always been golf instruction and individual coaching. I really didn't know if coaching in the college environment was something I would enjoy. It was a great decision to take on this challenge," Gonzalez said. "The kids I've coached over the past five years have all been a blessing. TAMIU is truly a great environment and institution. I am extremely proud of the work of my assistant, Will Wurth, all the kids that have played here, and myself have contributed to turn things around for Dustdevil Golf.

"It's all been a pleasure for me to personally be a part of. It is truly a special time in my career."

### BASEBALL

After installing numerous major athletic programs over a two-year window in 2002 and 2003, the school didn't hit the diamond until four years later. That's when the TAMIU baseball team took the field for the first time as it debuted at Tarleton State on Feb. 3, 2007 with an 8-0 loss. The group lost two of three that series but rebounded with 13 straight wins on their way to a successful 32-18-1 inaugural campaign.

Strangely enough, the team never seemed to reach those same heights again as they did in Year 1. In fact, they've had a winning record only once more since, going 27-26 in 2013.

Mark Jackson (51-55-1) coached the first two seasons before Mickey Callaway (22-34) – a future New

York Mets manager in 2018-19 and the Los Angeles Angels pitching coach to begin 2020 – took over for 2009. The star player for both leaders, Ryan Flynn, would later join the school's third head coach's staff in Chad Porter (101-156), who took the team to its only conference tournament appearance in 2013.

Flynn (78-179) would later take over for Porter for the top position in 2015 and has coached five full seasons. He was working on a sixth in 2020 as the team was 5-17 before the campaign was canceled mid-season due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"TAMIU and the City of Laredo hold a special place in my heart," Flynn said. "Being recruited by TAMIU and ultimately choosing to come to TAMIU and this great city 1,300 miles away from home to play baseball and get my degree was the greatest decision I could have ever made at that time.

"TAMIU led me to continuing my playing career where I played professionally for two of the city's independent baseball teams, meeting and marrying my beautiful wife (from Nuevo Laredo), starting a family, and becoming the head baseball coach at my alma mater. I have met, worked and become great friends with so many influential people from this great university and city. I am proud of my alma mater and how far it has come. I am also proud to be considered a Laredoan."

Flynn – a Heartland Conference Hall of Fame inductee in 2016 – is the school's only three-time All-Conference honoree in its history as a player, winning first-team honors twice in 2008-09. Austin Voros and Will Wurth are the only other two-time first-team honorees with both awarded in 2011-12. Zeke Sosa

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(2009), Chris Collazo (2011), Abdel Rivera (2013), Alex Salas (2013), Alex McKeon (2014), Alexander Cabezas (2017) and Jorge Napoles (2019) each won first-team honors once.

Jeff Anderson (2013) and Gordie Taggart (2014) each won gold gloves from the American Baseball Coaches Association and Heartland Conference, while Rey Alvarez (2010), Luis Bracero (2010), Jerry Hawkins (2013), Sean Smedley (2013) and McKeon (2014) all won gold gloves from just the conference.

## SOFTBALL

The TAMIU softball program has been the model of consistency since nearly its inception. Lee Dobbins' group took the field for the first time on Feb. 1, 2008 in a 10-2 loss to Midwestern State as it dropped its first 10 games in a 12-35 season.

After that, however, Scott Libby took the reins and hasn't let them go. Libby finished his 12th season with an all-time record of 262-373. He was riding a remarkable streak of qualifying for the conference tournament in every single year he

coached before the pandemic-shortened 2020 kept him and everyone else from playing for a league title.

Libby guided the program to a regular-season and tournament championship in 2011. He also won the Heartland's Coach of the Year honor in 2010.

"I was a high school coach before I got hired here, and my aspiration was to go to the college ranks," Libby said. "There were several of



Photo by Laredo Morning Times

Scott Libby has made the conference tournament in every one of his 11 full seasons for TAMIU softball.

my former players that had played at TAMIU their first year of softball when they were a provisional Division II school, and then the job came open. I jumped at it, and luckily TAMIU hired me. I will always be grateful for TAMIU giving me this job at the college level."

The Dustdevils have two league Player of the Year winners in their history in Victoria Beltran (2011) and Maddison Schofield (2019). The pair are also two of the four players that have earned first-team All-Con-

ference honors twice as the winners include Beltran (2010-11), Samantha Garcia (2009, 2011), Maya Paul (2018-19) and Schofield (2018-19).

"It's come a long way in the 12 years I've been there," Libby said. "Griz Zimmermann has done a great job as athletic director as far as trying to provide us with the money so we can go out there to help us recruit upper-echelon players with as much scholarship money as we can."


*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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**CONGRATULATIONS**

**TAMIU**

**50TH ANNIVERSARY CLASS OF 2020**

We commend our 50th Anniversary Graduating Class of 2020. In this, their graduation year, they've risen to the challenge of a world of change.

It's brought their classroom from shared space to laptop... and proud senior year traditions to a near standstill...for now.

With equal parts innovation and resilience, our Class of 2020 graduates continue our proud legacy and mission. Like all our graduates, they'll lead a World of Difference.

We look forward to celebrating their accomplishments at a Commencement Ceremony scheduled Thursday August 13, 2020 at 4 p.m. in the Sames Auto Arena.

**WE'LL BE TAMIU TOGETHER AND ALWAYS.**

