

sports

Bringing new opportunities to campus: sports added in recent years

CHRISTINE JENKINSON
News Editor

In the past four years, Ashland University has added five new sports to the athletic department roster: women’s lacrosse, Esports, STUNT and the readmittance of men’s soccer and men’s tennis.

Al King, athletic director at AU, reports to the president with any sports-related ideas - such as adding them to the university. King tries to look at adding a sport a year in advance.

After bringing an idea to their meeting, the sport will be “torn apart” and studied by King, the president and five other people from athletics to see if adding the sport makes sense to AU.

They look at national trends, participation rates throughout the country, if it is popular in the mid-west, the type of weather the sport requires and injury rates.

Then, they look at the AU-side of the sport: gym space, locker room space, outdoor facilities (or is there a facility close by that AU can use?).

Cost is a heavy player when thinking about adding a sport to AU. King and his associates try to project how many student athletes they would have and financially look at locker room space, travel, equipment and practice/game facilities.

Finally, they see if it is a GLIAC sponsored sport. If it is, athletes can compete for a conference title.

STUNT

These research questions cover the general process, but what about STUNT? Since it is such an emerging sport, King and Denise Farnsworth, AU head STUNT/Cheer/ Dance Coach, took time to make sure this was the right decision.

Last school year, STUNT was going to be added, but without feeling 100 percent confident, King decided to wait. This year, King went to the Board of Trustees and STUNT was officially added on Nov. 11, 2019.

“I cried when I received the news, it was very emotional because this was something that we had been working on for so long,” Farnsworth said. “It is super exciting to be creating a brand new program here. I think about the fact that not many cheer coaches in the state of

Ohio get to be full-time employees and I am blessed.”

STUNT is a spring sport that consists of four quarters, just like football or basketball. Each quarter is as follows: partner stunts, pyramids/tosses, jumps/tumbling and a team routine.

Each quarter is a short routine that both teams perform at the same time. The team that wins the round is awarded with a point.

The GLIAC needs to have six varsity STUNT teams competing in order to have a GLIAC championship. Davenport and AU have varsity STUNT programs, while Grand Valley and Ferris both have club level programs.

STUNT’s roster goal is 20-25 this first year and then get to 30-35. King said that the program seems to be taking off in the mid-west region.

Just like all sports, travel needs to be planned. Michigan, Kentucky, Pennsylvania are not only places where STUNT is growing, but the team will not have to travel far from Ohio.

STUNT’s events will be held in Kates Gymnasium.

Esports

Another emerging sport in the United States is Esports. AU was, again, ahead of the curve when adding this rising-in-popularity sport.

AU was around the first of about 50 schools to add this varsity sport. Their roster has doubled in size in year two: 20-25 athletes to 40-45 athletes. Now, there are at least 170 schools who have added Esports.

Esports has six different games: League of Legends, Overwatch, CS:GO, Hearthstone, Fortnite and Super Smash Brothers Ultimate. Each student specializes in one of those games, making six separate teams, all falling under the same umbrella of Esports.

To get recruited, students need to have a certain skill level in those games. Because of that, they come in already owning the game and then just log into their account and play here at AU. Players’ statistics are easily available online, so those are being taken into account, in addition to their tryout.

Since Esports is not part of the NCAA or GLIAC (yet), the National Association of Collegiate Esports is what the sport looks to as a governing figure. Academic-wise,

Esports athletes are treated the same as NCAA sponsored athletes.

The athlete’s mindset greatly affects their overall performance. Buchanan teaches his athletes to learn so the athlete can figure out how they learn best and always be ready to change to keep up with the many changes in the game.

Another thing he teaches is avoiding tilt, a term Esports picked up from poker. If a player is struggling, they will get upset and the mindset will be stuck, making it nearly impossible to actively learn.

“If you have a bad mindset during practice, you’re not going to improve probably at all,” Buchanan said.



AU ATHLETICS

Women’s lacrosse saw its first season at AU in spring 2019.

an said. “It’s really important that we teach our students to have good composure, learn good meditation habits to get themselves in the zone and be able to constantly make the most of their practices.”

Women’s lacrosse

As an NCAA recognized and GLIAC sport and in its second year, women’s lacrosse is excited to get their season underway starting Feb. 23, 2020.

After becoming an official sport at AU, Shaun Williamson, head women’s lacrosse coach, realized that his players did not need to be told that this process was going to

take a while.

“Our administration has been very supportive and helpful,” Williamson said. “But like at any school, starting a program takes time and many years to do it correctly and we are still in the middle of that. Our players have great work ethics and a desire to build a winning tradition for the lacrosse program.”

Their first season, the team went 5-11, a record Williamson was pleased with. There were three new-to-the-GLIAC teams that AU defeated.

Then-sophomore, Sofia Michael, was the team’s first all conference

player. “Our administration has been very supportive and helpful,” Williamson said. “But like at any school, starting a program takes time and many years to do it correctly and we are still in the middle of that. Our players have great work ethics and a desire to build a winning tradition for the lacrosse program.”

Athletics and the future

It is clear that students looking to be an athlete at AU have many new opportunities to get ahead of the game and compete in new sports.

“We’re trying, in athletics, to do as many things as we can to give people opportunities,” King said. “I want to get more opportunities for women athletes. Lacrosse does that and STUNT’s going to do that. If we get STUNT 25-30 people, we have lacrosse at 25-28, there’s 60 opportunities for women.”

Financially, adding sports to AU makes sense. An increase in enrollment means more money for the university. Recognition for academics in sports helps the school’s reputation as well.

“I do think with some of these sports, you get a chance to spread AU’s name,” King said. “For Esports, we were mentioned in Forbes magazine and Good Morning America. I think it puts you into a new arena where it gets the word out to a different audience and different states...the university benefits any time we can bring a different activity here and that’s what we try to do.”

Head coach of men’s soccer Oliver Slawson believes that adding new teams will not only bring students to AU, but it also means bringing new coaches, administrators and student athletes to add to AU’s athletic-academic reputation.

“I think it’s great that they’re adding new teams,” Slawson said. “I’m looking forward to hopefully watching those teams develop and grow and be given the support that they need to be competitive in their fields and I hope men’s soccer can be on that trajectory as well of being a program that the school is proud of and support in a manner that allows student athletes to feel like they’re equals.”

By separating themselves from the college sports pack, AU has gained recognition from national media and can get their programs adjusted early, before the trends become the norm.

“You do the best research you can and go from there, as you get into it, you learn,” King said.

Baseball team enters season with high hopes

JOHN MARGIDA
Reporter

After competing in the Division II College World Series with a 48-15 overall record last season, the Ashland University baseball team is primed for battle entering their 2020 campaign.

The Eagles were able to overcome slow starts in both the Regional and Super Regional last summer to get themselves to Carry, N.C. for the 2019 College World Series. They ran into contender Central Missouri twice and were able to win a game, making sure they didn’t go home empty-handed.

“We are bringing back a lot of guys with great postseason experience we can build on,” head baseball coach John Schaly said. “Hopefully, we will be a little better offensively and defensively because of the experience with our position players. But the key to our season is bringing along some of our newer pitchers we have gotten through transfers; we hope that the veteran lineup we have coming back will take some of the pressure from the pitching staff.”

This season, the Eagle team returns eight of the nine starters from last year’s lineup. Leading the lineup this year will be senior first baseman Carson Mittermair and

senior outfielder Michael Rogers.

Senior pitcher Chance Hitchcock will be leading the rotation again this season for Ashland. Coming off a year where he finished with a

leadership.”

At the helm of the pitching staff, Hitchcock is confident approaching the new season and challenges it

reliever last season but had a pivotal role in the teams’ successes, according to Schaly.

The AU baseball team will undoubtedly learn what is working



AU ATHLETICS

Senior pitcher Chance Hitchcock.

9-2 record as a starter in 15 starts and finished with a sub 3.00 earn run average (ERA).

“He has gotten even stronger over the off-season picking up a 2 to 3 mph velocity wise on his fastball,” Schaly said. “We think he could be even better this year than he was last year. He should have better command and got some great experience last year getting our win at the World Series. He will definitely help some of our new pitch-

ers come along as well with his

might pose. “I’m definitely ready to go for this season,” Hitchcock said. “I just want to help my team win ball games and get back to the World Series.”

With Hitchcock leading the starters, the bullpen will be looking to replace closer Chris Slavik who had a fantastic season in that role a year ago. The team intends to replace Slavik with redshirt senior Josh Smith. Smith played middle

well and not-so well for the team over the first month of the season, as they play a brutal schedule against many skillful teams.

“This is the toughest beginning of a schedule that I have ever coached,” Schaly said. “Out of our first 16 games, we are playing 13 of them against teams that are currently ranked or currently receiving votes.”

They open the season at Charleston (WV), whose team was one

game away from the World Series last season. Southern Indiana, the second competitor, has won two national championships and been to the World Series five times in the past decade.

The Eagles will then travel to Florida for their spring break trip where they will play Minnesota State-Mankato twice during their time there. Also on the schedule in Florida is St. Cloud State who won over 40 games last season, West Chester who has won two national championships in the past decade, and Seton Hill who is also receiving votes in Division II preseason rankings.

“Our goal is the same every year: take it one step at a time, win the conference regular season, then win the conference tournament, win the regional, win the super regional, and get back to the World Series and win the World Series. That never changes,” Schaly said.

The Eagles will open the season up as the No. 7 ranked team in the country and will travel to Charleston, W.V. to take on the No. 24 ranked University of Charleston on Feb. 22 with the first pitch of game one set for 1:00 pm.