Gator coaches reflect on COVID-19 outbreak, lost season

Henry Sutter, Sports Editor|April 22, 2020

The Allegheny College Baseball team gathered at Robertson Field for practice the day after their fifth consecutive victory, a 3-1 win against Grove City College on Wednesday, March 11. Unbeknownst to them at the time they took the field, this would be their last game and practice of the 2020 season.

Head Coach Brandon Crum said that he informed the team that their spring break trip to Tucson, Arizona, was cancelled and that all athletics would be suspended for two weeks because of the outbreak of COVID-19. He also informed the team that the season was probably finished, and that they were not obligated to stay for practice as they made travel arrangements to return to their hometowns.

Every October, before the start of the season, the baseball team holds a Blue-Gold World Series, an intersquad scrimmage in which the players switch positions and have a fun, friendly competition, according to Crum. The underclassmen on the team decided to rehost the game on Thursday, March 12, and invited the seniors to participate in one last game with the Gators.

“For the next hour and a half to two hours, I saw a little bit of joy in the seniors’ faces, and they were smiling,” Crum said. “I was fighting back tears. I had to take a little walk down the outfield line just to watch these guys. The underclassmen, who really don’t know what it’s like to have their careers end, they took the show over and showed these seniors one more good day on Robertson Field. It was one of the more remarkable things I’ve ever been a part of.”

Crum said that the team was poised to start 10-3 after their spring break trip, which would have been the fastest start for the program in more than a decade. Watching the Blue-Gold World Series, he said that he found a different way to appraise the team’s season.

“I saw a little bit of our culture seep through that difficult situation, and as a leader, it’s easy to evaluate yourself on wins and losses,” Crum said. “I think the best way to evaluate yourself is when tough times come; when you face adversity, how does the culture handle itself? How do the guys within the culture respond?”

As of Friday, March 13, the North Coast Athletic Conference “made the difficult and challenging decision to cancel the 2020 spring conference regular season and championships, effective immediately,” according to the NCAC Instagram page.

With the 2020 season abruptly ended, Crum said that the team’s goal will be to advance to the NCAC Tournament in 2021 in honor of the class of 2020.

“Each year is a chapter in the Allegheny Baseball history,” Crum said. “It’s a really unique one, and it’s one that we’ll use as strength and motivation. The younger guys have already said when we make it to the Conference Tournament next year, there will be seven seats on that bus, seven empty seats for these seniors. We want to do it for them.”

In similar fashion to the baseball team, men’s golf found their spring break trip and season cancelled because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Head Coach Jeff Groff broke the news to his team before they parted for the season. Addressing the four seniors on the team, Groff complimented their dedication and passion for Allegheny athletics.

“We’re sorry how it ended,” Groff said. “We wish there was a better ending for all the spring sports athletes. I thank them for their time and their effort. Four-year athletes are a dying breed, and for them to hang in there through all the ups and downs, they’re pretty special people. You really feel for the seniors.”

The men’s golf team was able to complete their fall season and finished first place in their first five tournaments before placing second at the Atlantic Invitational in Jupiter, Florida, in October.

The women’s lacrosse team was off to a 3-1 start to their season before the COVID-19 shutdown, outscoring their opponents 54-35 on the year.

Head Coach Ashley Hughes, ’08, said that the team was gathered in the locker room when news broke about the cancellation of NCAC Championships, and that many on the team knew the cancelled season

was soon to follow. Addressing her seniors, she gave words of encouragement, praise and hope for the future of the team.

“Ah man, the seniors,” Hughes said. “This was hard for me when we were having that chat in the locker room. These were the last three standing that I wouldn’t have necessarily guessed to be the last three standing. But oh man, what character it shows that they are strong enough to and they were the right three that we needed to be here at this moment. I’ve been able to take a lot away from them individually and as a senior group. I can’t say thanks enough to them. They taught a young team what it means to have drive and compassion.”

All three coaches said they have been texting, emailing, and calling their players to keep motivation and morale high as the student-athletes transition to life off campus.

“I let (the baseball team) know that we’re all going through it together,” Crum said. “I’m just trying to show them that, as their leader, we’re all handling this together. We’re all learning things along the way, and it’s going to shape the rest of our lives.”

Groff said that the severity and importance of the COVID-19 outbreak overshadow the difficulty of losing the team’s season, and had a message for those who are struggling with the move away from the Allegheny campus community.

“Focus on your family and friends where you are back home,” Groff said. “Sometimes we overlook that and take that for granted, but if there’s a

message in all this, it's to slow down in life. It sounds corny, but that may be the best thing about this. Just hang in there and take it day by day."