

Want to Try Out for College Sports? Forget It

The NY Times | 21 September 2002 | BILL PENNINGTON

By BILL PENNINGTON

A gymnast since the first grade, Jason Lindberg had just one goal in his athletic life: to compete for the gymnastics team at the University of Oklahoma. Oklahoma did not offer him a gymnastics scholarship when Lindberg was a high school senior in Tulsa last spring, but he chose to enroll there anyway. Lindberg figured he would be a freshman walk-on in gymnastics. Celebrated in the movie "Rudy," walk-ons are plucky, unrecruited undergraduates who walk on to practice and make a team filled with elite scholarship athletes. They have long held an almost mythic status in college sports, embodying dreamers and underdogs everywhere.

But Lindberg's arrival on the Oklahoma campus was less storybook. No male walk-ons would be permitted in gymnastics, he was told.

At many colleges nationwide, it has become commonplace in recent years to turn away walk-ons in men's sports like soccer, baseball, tennis, gymnastics, and track and field. As another school year began in the past few weeks, the doors at athletic departments were slamming shut to thousands of men seeking a tryout.

"It's like they're taking away whatever hopes and dreams you might have, which is pretty hard to take," said Lindberg, who is 19. "Because you get into sports believing you'll always at least get the chance to prove yourself."

Male walk-ons have essentially become an unwanted luxury. Most colleges work hard to maintain a roughly equal number of male and female participants — whether on scholarship or not — in athletics. They do so to comply with Title IX, the law prohibiting sex discrimination in federally funded institutions. But their pursuit of that goal is entangled by budget limitations and the addition of thousands of new teams for women over the past decade. This delicate balancing act is disrupted each year when three to four times more men than women arrive unsolicited for the first week of practices, dozens of coaches and administrators said in interviews.

Athletic department administrators have generally responded to the disparity by telling coaches of women's teams to keep as many walk-ons as they can, even encouraging them to scour campuses for more candidates to fill their rosters. The coaches of many men's teams, meanwhile, have been assigned a reduced, fixed roster limit, a number that is quickly filled by established recruits. Often, there is no room for walk-ons.

At some of the bigger college athletic programs, like Michigan, Ohio State and Texas A&M, where television revenue from big-time sports makes expansive team rosters affordable for both men and women, there are still male walk-ons in certain sports, especially football. But the opposite is true for the coaches of smaller, nonrevenue sports and at hundreds of colleges whose athletic departments are not among the top 50 moneymakers.

At Oklahoma, for example, the men's gymnastics coach, Mark Williams, is permitted a roster of no more than 14. Twelve gymnasts are needed to field a team in a meet. "We used to have 24 or 25 guys," said Williams, whose team won the national championship last season.

Warren Mandrell, the men's track and cross-country coach at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, said he turned away about 30 students each year.

"I sent one away about four minutes ago," Mandrell said last week. "We used to have 75 or 80 kids out for track and field. Not anymore. My roster limit is 43."

Larry Cochell, the baseball coach at Oklahoma, had a one-day tryout for walk-ons during the first week of classes. Twenty-five students brought gloves and bats to practice. Asked how many had made the team, Cochell, whose roster is fixed at 32, answered, "None."

The Miami of Ohio baseball coach, Tracy Smith, did not have a walk-on make his team for the past six seasons. Last week, during a tryout for 20 students, Smith was surprised to find a prospect, a diamond in the rough.

"But what that kid did was next to impossible, " said Smith, who turned away the rest of those who tried out and will have to cut nine players to reach his roster limit of 32.

At the College of William and Mary, the director of track, Dan Stimson, used to send an invitation to try out to every freshman who listed high school track and field on his application.

Stimson stopped that practice years ago. Last year, he cut 12 men from his team.

Al Albert, the men's soccer coach at William and Mary for the past 32 years, recalled when he had a junior varsity team — something now almost nonexistent at most colleges. Albert said he had excluded 15 to 20 students from his 25-man roster in each of the last seven years.

"How many freshmen, myself included, from years ago would have never learned and benefited from a college sports experience if not given the chance to walk on?" Albert said. "You never know what kind of important life lessons — goal-setting, handling adversity, learning teamwork or testing yourself and your limits — might be acquired as part of a college sport. It's a shame when we can't cultivate that for everybody."

A Grasp Impedes a Reach

John McDonnell has won 36 national titles as the coach of cross-country and track and field at the University of Arkansas. That record may be why he is among the minority of coaches allowed to welcome all comers to his program. "What they are doing with walk-ons elsewhere is deplorable," McDonnell said. "A student should never be told, 'You can't try.' We are supposed to build leaders and instead we're saying, 'Don't reach for something.' We have an obesity problem, and we're telling college kids to go back to the dorm, sit on the couch and watch sports on television."

Others involved in college athletics, notably the dozens of female administrators who have ascended to positions of leadership, concede that the landscape has changed, but they see the picture differently.

Restricting some men's teams, even as women's teams are assigned minimums that are usually 5 to 10 players higher than the maximums on similar men's teams, is a reasonable policy called roster management, they say. It has been necessary, they contend, because colleges have chosen to add thousands of women's teams to abide by Title IX. At the same time, especially in the past decade, many athletic budgets have been slashed.

Something has had to give: why not the walk-on who may never actually play in a game?

"I hated the movie 'Rudy,'" said Marilyn McNeil, athletic director of Monmouth University in West Long Branch, N.J., referring to the film about perhaps the most famous walk-on of all, Rudy Ruettiger of Notre Dame. Ruettiger endured years as a scrub on the practice squad until, as a senior concluding his career, he was allowed into a game for one play, and he sacked the quarterback.

"If you're not going to get your uniform dirty during games, you shouldn't be on the team," said McNeil, who is also the chairwoman of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's committee on women's athletics. "I believe there is still an opportunity for a walk-on to bloom on our teams, but there has to be a cutoff date for those who just want to hang around. We can't afford it. It's time to tell these students: 'You've got other talents. Go write about sports at the school newspaper, join the debate team, or maybe you've got a nice voice and belong on the stage.'"

"Some guys just like to be part of the group. Then 10 years later they will talk about being on their college team, when the fact is they never played."

McNeil and others say there are major differences in how men and women approach being walk-ons, and that complicates the roster management issue. Most administrators say it is generally harder to keep female walk-ons on a team once they realize they will play little or not at all in the games. But it is common for men, administrators say, to remain on a team even if they do not dress for the games. Together, this helps create the roster imbalance most colleges are trying to avoid.

"For men, there is a social validation tied to being part of a college team," said Cheryl Marra, the associate athletic director at the University of Wisconsin. "If you're wearing a Rose Bowl ring, it will elicit a response. It is an accomplishment that is understood and respected by people across the desk in a job interview. It doesn't matter if you were player No. 120 on the team and never touched the football in that Rose Bowl. Being part of a championship women's gymnastics team probably doesn't have the same value. At least not yet."

Marra, who has helped create and oversee an intensive program of roster management at Wisconsin since the college was targeted for potential Title IX violations several years ago, has observed other gender differences in her 23 years in college athletics.

"First of all, the disparity in ability between a scholarship player and a walk-on is usually much greater on the women's side than the men's side," Marra said. "So women walk-ons are not usually comfortable. Plus, I see more unrest on women's teams if a sector of the group isn't involved or kept a regular part of the drills. Men don't react that way. They just want into the drill to prove themselves. Women will say: 'Look, I see the picture pretty clearly here. I'm not playing. I don't need this.' "

Achieving a Balance

That has not stopped Wisconsin and many other colleges from adopting strategies to involve more women in intercollegiate sports. They have established new sports, like rowing, that are by design inclusive to a large number of athletes and not structured to focus on a starting lineup of only 5 or 10 players. At Wisconsin this year, there are 170 women on two rowing teams, a roster number that for Title IX purposes balances the football, baseball and men's basketball teams combined. At Wisconsin, the women's rowing coaches work the rooms used for freshman orientation and registration with sign-up sheets in hand, lobbying for tryouts.

At U.C.L.A., the recruiting of female walk-ons in search of perfect roster management was so successful, administrators had to use some reins. "You would go by the pool and hear someone say, 'There's too many people in my lane during practice,'" Betsy Stephenson, the associate athletic director, said. "And the coaches were just worn out with such large numbers to oversee."

U.C.L.A. recently made adjustments and now fills most of its male and female rosters with scholarship athletes and with athletes who represent another new and increasingly common category in college athletics — a recruited walk-on. Recruited walk-ons are high school athletes who are told they will not receive a scholarship but will be accepted on the team. Some colleges even guarantee their recruited walk-ons a spot on the team roster in writing.

"We can recruit walk-ons that probably would be scholarship athletes at 80 percent of the other schools in the nation," Stephenson said.

The recruited walk-ons are more bad news for true walk-ons, another blow to the notion that any student can tap the coach on the shoulder and ask for a tryout. "That kind of opportunity doesn't exist anymore," said Albert, William and Mary's soccer coach. "It's a vanishing concept."

Many coaches of men's teams lament the lost opportunities and are critical of roster-management policies. But Marra, the associate athletic director at Wisconsin, said she reminded her men's coaches that the alternative was to drop a men's sport or two.

"That's the reality, because the participation numbers for men and women have to be addressed," Marra said. "It's financial and it's Title IX. We can't be all things to everybody. Things change."

"Rudy" she noted, was set in the early 1970's. "Some things aren't the way they used to be," Marra said.

Perseverance Finds Success

But there are always exceptions, and they are frequently on the football team, where the lore of the walk-on remains strongest. College football rosters have traditionally been very deep. The average number for all N.C.A.A. football teams last season was 94 players. With 60 to 85 players on scholarship — and with recruited walk-ons — there is not a lot of opportunity. But with perseverance, at certain colleges, there are holes to permit the stray walk-on to slip through.

Drew Hill, a sprinter hoping to make the track team as a walk-on at William and Mary, was one of the runners cut last year.

"I felt cheated," Hill said. "I'm on academic scholarship. Even the coach said the most I was costing the college was two track shoes a year."

Feeling a void, Hill decided to try out for the football team this year. He made the team, and while Hill has yet to play in a game, he is on the roster of 91 players.

"I wanted to end my athletic career on my terms, not someone else's terms," Hill said. "If I never get into a game, it won't be a failure. I wanted to try. Well, I wanted to try again."