

ATHLETICS DIRECTORS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA TAKING THE NEXT STEP FORWARD

The University of North Florida (UNF) is making tremendous strides in developing its sports facilities as it looks to shape its athletics department's future.

In spring 2009, UNF President John Delaney announced the hiring of Lee Moon as director of athletics. Moon, a long-time collegiate administrator and former AD at Wyoming and Marshall, has proven successful in building athletics departments.

While at Wyoming, Moon was responsible for a \$15 million budget and helped secure the largest financial donation — \$4.2 million for the naming rights of the student-athletics center, the Rochelle Athletics Center — in the history of the institution. He also helped secure a \$2 million donation at Marshall for naming rights to a similar facility. He has a keen eye for coaching talent, and while at Marshall, hired basketball coach Billy Donovan, who later went on to win two national championships at Florida.

The North Florida program has completed its four-year transition to Division I and understandably it will take time to fully develop into a program that has the staff, players, facilities and atmosphere of programs competing at the highest level of intercollegiate athletics. Moon's track record suggests that UNF is already heading in the right direction.

The strategic improvement of athletics facilities is a priority for the athletics department. The aim of the project is to improve recruiting, attract donors, and consequently, enhance athletics performance.

"We are focusing on raising money to get our donors, supporters and alumni all vested in our program," said Moon. "People who have money want to invest in success and they also want to see that you are investing also. Updating facilities also gives us the chance to recruit at the Division I level."

The North Florida athletics program includes 17 NCAA Division I teams. UNF's athletics facilities consist of UNF Arena for basketball and women's volleyball, Hodges Stadium for soccer and track and field, Harmon Stadium for baseball, the UNF Softball Complex, the UNF Aquatic Center and the Hayt Golf Learning Center. Some of the facilities were already of high standards before Moon's arrival. The plan now is to address every single sport by bringing the entire athletics facility to consistent high standards.

"In the spring, people will see that we have made investments in all of our athletics programs. We have tried to touch every program that we have," explained Moon.

UNF's competitive track, completed in August 2008, is the latest model by Italian company Mondo called the Mondotrack SX. It is the same surface used at the Olympic track in Beijing.

"This track gives us a top-of-the-line facility where we can host any kind of competition in track and field, from an NCAA event to international competition. That says volumes about our track program and where we can go once we put the right funding in place for scholarships. But as far as track and field facilities, there is none better," said Moon of the 9,400-seat Hodges Stadium.

The golf facilities are top notch, according to Ervin Lewis, associate athletics director of facilities/operations at UNF.



Akil Burgen



"It is an excellent opportunity for the team to practice on campus, in conjunction with the nearby Glen Kernan Course, both of which are great facilities."

This past fall, the program was ranked as high as No. 15 in the nation and at one point had a golfer ranked No. 1 in the country.

The baseball and softball facilities are being upgraded with new outfield fencing, safety-topping fences, windscreens, marketing banners and freshly painted dugouts. Most significantly, the infields have recently been laser graded professionally to provide proper drainage.

The varsity tennis courts were resurfaced a year ago, and the scoreboards have just been repainted. In addition, new windscreens with UNF colors have been put up around all competitive courts.

Extra grounds crews have been hired to improve maintenance of the facilities. This will greatly benefit the soccer programs, which use Hodges Stadium, a facility that exceeds college requirements.

Hodges Stadium is also home to the athletics program's strength and conditioning facility, completed in 2008. It houses more than \$200,000 in strength and conditioning equipment, and was made possible through generous donations from longtime UNF boosters John Hayt and Tony Weight.

Men's and women's basketball, softball, volleyball and the swimming and diving team locker rooms have all been remodeled, with the swimming and diving team also receiving a new lounge.

"They may not be as big as the elite Division I programs, but they are as nice as any locker rooms in the country," explained Moon.

Moon also noted that since the athletics department staff has been increased, plans are being put in place to add more office space for the coaches and staff. This project will be an effort to give coaches the opportunity to hold recruiting meetings in their offices and to have all of the athletics staff in one building.

Lewis is impressed by the improvements to the facilities and is certain the program will reap the benefits.

"Since stepping on the campus in August 2009, our facilities have changed drastically," said Lewis. "We still have a long way to go, but we are headed in the right direction. Athletes are going to work harder and coaches will have the best environment to work in."

In another effort to upgrade and show commitment to the Division I level, Moon was able to negotiate a five-year, all-sport Nike contract in July 2009.

"Not many schools without a college football program have an all-sport Nike contract," Moon explains. "This goes hand-in-hand with the development of our facilities and completes UNF's image as a Division I program."

Moon understands that providing quality facilities is just one of the first steps to creating a national title contending program. These changes do not guarantee immediate success, but it is an important step that developing athletics programs must adopt to have any chance of competing at the highest level. With the anticipated development that the program receives from increased funding opportunities and improved recruiting possibilities, North Florida can rise to become a nationally recognized program in the near future.

Thanks for this article to Akil Burgen, former soccer student-athlete and current media relations intern at the University of North Florida.