

LMU

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Loyola Marymount made a tough choice to drop 6 sports – will similar universities follow suit?

College athletics' evolution will affect smaller schools and programs that don't generate significant income

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Bonnie Adair was in the middle of coaching her team in a workout when the team's assistant coach notified her to check her email.

The former head coach of LMU's women's swimming team initially said no because she dislikes using her phone during workouts.

The assistant told her, "You might want to read this one."

The email was a notification from LMU's athletic department about a crucial meeting in two hours. In the meeting, LMU athletic director Craig Pintens notified the coaches of six sports – rowing, women's swimming, track and field and men's cross country teams — that their sports would be discontinued after the 2023-2024 academic year.

Fifteen minutes later, the student-athletes from those sports were told the same news.

LMU's decision was based on the larger, evolving NCAA landscape and the school's sports offerings outpacing its capacity "to provide the best possible student-athlete experience."

Schools of similar sizes will have similar decisions to face.

In July, settlement documents for the House v. NCAA suit were filed in a Northern District Court of California.

The landmark case, initially filed in 2020, seeks back pay for Division I college athletes, dating to 2016, who were prevented from receiving name, image, and likeness (NIL) compensation before the NCAA changed its policy in the summer of 2021.

The settlement also creates a system where student-athletes can receive a portion of future broadcast revenues for athletes. Schools can decide individually to opt in to the revenue-sharing model and other changes, such as eliminating scholarship limits and other roster changes.

As of Sept. 5, the presiding judge Claudia Wilkins sent the settlement back to the lawyers to address language limiting third-party pay to athletes, including NIL collectives and boosters.

However, it appears the back-pay figures are intact. If the settlement goes through, all Division I conferences will be on the hook for \$2.8 billion going back to athletes.

The attorney general in South Dakota and the University of South Dakota have challenged the settlement proposal in a lawsuit that says the structure of the settlement is unfair to schools outside the power conferences and unfair to female athletes.

According to Pintens, the department didn't expect the changes to come this fast, but the demands from the settlement are likely to take effect starting in the 2025-2026 school year and will reshape athletic department budgets across the country.

After decades of the NCAA operating under the concept of amateurism, college athletics is now experiencing a dramatic pull toward professionalism. With billions of dollars in broadcast revenue circulating in the Power 4 conferences, the courts have opened the legal floodgates for student-athletes to benefit from the product they make.

On the other hand, the drag to a professional model in football and basketball may leave the rest of college athletics behind.

"College athletics are stuck between amateurism and professionalism in this purgatory," said Ross Dellenger, a senior college football reporter at Yahoo Sports and one of the leading reporters following the House v. NCAA case. "It's being pulled more toward the professionalism business model and people in business are going to make smart business decisions."

He added that athletic directors are "pouring more resources" into sports that would make money.

"The amateurism model we've had is slowly disappearing," Dellenger said.

A decline in Olympic sports

The six sports at LMU that were cut are called non-revenue or Olympic sports. At most colleges, these sports don't generate money for an institution. Their value lies in the experience it creates for many student-athletes who participate.

"Athletics is valuable, and the broader base that you can support, the more good you're doing in the world," said Adair, the only full-time women's swimming coach at LMU in its history. "You're giving 350 to 400 student-athletes an experience versus 250 student-athletes. That experience goes well beyond the four years of college and into their professional and family lives."

The collegiate system helps the United States develop athletes for the Olympics. Adair says swimming has become a dominant American sport because of the collegiate system.

"I'm feeling that's vulnerable right now," Adair said.

At this summer's Paris Olympics, the U.S. finished first with 126 medals, followed by China with 91 medals.

Swimming is among the top U.S. Olympic sports, bringing in 28 total medals as an individual-awarded sport that has a high ceiling to bring in more medals. Still, the U.S. has consistently produced some of the most decorated overall Olympians, like Michael Phelps and Kate Ledecky.

But the system that's produced many high-level athletes is at risk.

A painful decision

Pintens called cutting the six sports "one of the worst possible decisions that an athletic director can make."

"It's the most painful thing I've ever had to do professionally," Pintens said. "Standing in front of 100 student-athletes to dramatically change their life is not something that anybody wants to do. I'll never forget that feeling."

Will Luders is one of the athletes whose sport was stripped away. Luders ran cross country in the fall and track and field in the spring. He had one more year of eligibility left before graduation.

He decided not to transfer out of LMU because of the marketing program he got into within LMU's College of Business Administration.

He remembers being "totally distraught" after hearing the news.

"How could the school we worked so hard for, the school we worked so hard to represent, betray us in such a way?" Luders said.

Luders was a part of a group that met with Pintens after the decision.

Luders said didn't get a clear answer during the meeting about why his sport was cut.

"He says it's not for financial reasons, and then he says it's an NIL issue," Luders said. "We want to know what the reasoning is so that we can work out a solution."

While at the time there wasn't anything definite to point to, Pintens said his decision was proactive, anticipating the result of the House v. NCAA case.

"We're in a lot different of a position after the House settlement than a lot of our peers will be because they're going to have to make difficult decisions to try to figure out how to fund everything," Pintens said.

Before the cuts, LMU had the highest number of sponsored sports (20) and had the most student-athletes (435) in the West Coast Conference. They also offer \$2.8 million more in athletic aid than the next closest school compared to their conference peers, according to a memo the school released following the cuts.

Pintens says his goal is for LMU's athletics to "be competitive at the highest level we possibly can."

Joey Caterinchio is an organizer with SaveLMUSports, an organization made up of student-athletes, LMU alumni, and Olympic sports advocates. It aims to reinstate the six-cut programs and "(restore) transparency and accountability into the decision-making" at LMU.

Caterinchio has a daughter on the women's swimming team and cross-country team.

"No one has talked about how they're basically sacrificing certain athletes to pay for team athletes that make money," Caterinchio said.

The problems with the situation extend beyond LMU. Currently, there aren't any NCAA rules about giving athletes a fair warning if their sport is discontinued.

"The NCAA is allowing this to happen," Caterinchio said. "To me, the entire landscape needs to go deeper, not just about NIL, not just about cash. What about the mental health of these athletes that just got their entire careers yanked from them?"

While athletes can now transfer an unlimited number of times without sitting out, players passed up opportunities at other colleges in favor of LMU. Due to the timing of the announcement, many players had trouble finding spots at other institutions.

"We were put in a weird spot of if you're going to leave, you have to scramble and see what other colleges have spots," Luders said. "There's so many alternatives to just cutting six sports."

Luders and Caterinchio have advocated for an endowment or outside fundraising for sports. Stanford endowed their sports after they were initially cut after the 2020-2021 academic year.

However, Pintens said the reasons for the decisions go beyond financials and have to do with the department's infrastructure.

He pointed out that the department had six athletic trainers for 20 teams last season. They added one more trainer heading into next year and now have seven trainers for 14 sports.

"The training services that we're being able to provide to our student-athletes are going to be better than they were in the past," Pintens said.

'You can only feed so many mouths'

Adair never had a full-time assistant on her coaching staff. When she became the first full-time head coach, the team had only volunteer coaches up to that point. When she started, she had no scholarships. She eventually built the program to have four scholarships, but that was eventually reduced.

In the history of the women's swimming program, she has always struggled to build resources for the team.

"I fought really hard for a long time fundraising and trying to keep our program afloat," Adair said. "We weren't well financed and we were always struggling to be competitive."

She was the sole coach of the team until last season when she created a spot in her program through the master's program she runs at LMU.

"You can only feed so many mouths and do it well and survive," Adair said. "So we're going to cut the mouths that we have to feed and try to get ahead of the curve and survive what's happening in athletics."

She also expressed that coaches at other schools in the WCC with new athletic directors have talked to her about their swim programs being cut.

Tanner Gardner of Pepperdine is one of those new athletic directors. He reaffirmed Pepperdine's commitment to broad-based success in athletics. Last year, Pepperdine won the WCC's Commissioner's Cup, which is an award for the school with the most success in all-around sports.

At the same time, he sees opportunity in the revenue-sharing and scholarship portions of the House v. NCAA settlement.

"It gives schools like us a lot more flexibility to invest in ways that we haven't had a chance to do before," said Gardener, who was appointed athletic director in March. "Now that certainly requires additional resources, and so how we get to those additional investments, that's what we're working through right now."

The WCC is a non-football conference. Football takes up the biggest percentage of the athletics budget of most universities that have the sport.

"Unless you're in the Big Ten or the SEC, which has differentially large media distributions, I think it's going to be really hard to compete in football," Gardener said.

His theory moving forward is that schools need to pick two pathways to have success in athletics.

"One of them is have the most money and that's by and large the Big Ten and SEC. The other type of schools that are going to win in the future are those that have a unique and distinguished value proposition," Gardener said. "It's trying to compete in a way other than money."

At Pepperdine, the school offers a "preeminent athletic program based on Christian values, academic excellence and one of the most beautiful places in America."

For LMU, their focus is being competitive at the highest level possible.

The injection of free market

Chris Benis was a student at LMU and the editor-in-chief of Los Angeles Loyolan last year. He is now a graduate student at USC.

As his time wrapped up as an undergraduate at LMU, he and others worked on a documentary about the changes in the athletic program at LMU called "Game Changer," which premiered Sept. 11 on LMU's campus.

His takeaway from the documentary is that schools don't want to pay non-revenue athletes the same as higher revenue-generating sports.

"That makes sense because how can the forces of free market enterprise not affect something as American as college sports," Benis said. "What you lose, though, is the sports that make the Olympics. You upset a lot of donors and a lot of people who think that sports is about more than money."

Benis believes there will be a trickle-down effect from school's divesting from Olympic sports.

"What happens when other schools choose the same thing that LMU did?" Benis asked. "People that use track and field or rowing or cross country or swim and dive as their ticket to college won't choose to do those things in high school anymore to get a scholarship to go to a Division I school."

In time, he thinks the U.S. as a whole will be less invested in Olympic sports if this trend continues.

However, the fight isn't over in his eyes.

"People still wear the SaveLMUSports T-shirt," Benis said. "I saw three as I walked to my choir class this morning at LMU."

College sports originated as extracurricular activity, mainly club sports or intramurals. But as football and basketball grew in popularity, they also became a business.

"All the other sports that don't generate revenue are at risk and that's unfortunate because college campuses in a broad-based sport structure make college campuses unique and it makes America unique," Yahoo reporter Dellenger said.

One term floating around athletic departments is "tiering" sports. To an extent there is already a tier system, but it is likely that will become further stratified in the new world of college athletics.

The first tier will be made up of basketball and football. A school may have a second and third tier. The bottom tier is where Dellenger thinks sports will become non-scholarship or cut altogether.

"America has a very unique setup," Dellenger said. "But it's a setup that as we're seeing isn't business savvy and we are realizing maybe why other countries don't have this setup that we do, but it does make it unique and it makes it unique on a college campus. It's unfortunate for those athletes; they may not get those experiences that those that came before them did."

One common sentiment is the House v. NCAA settlement isn't the end of the evolution of the NCAA.

"Many people in the industry and outside the industry that you've talked to believe that this settlement is a step in the right direction, but only a step and not a leap," Dellenger said. "The leap will inevitably be college athletes at the highest level being deemed employees and being employees of their schools and collectively bargaining with them."

In the short term, the settlement prevents other lawsuits and holds the NCAA together for the time being.

"This is an evolution, not a destination," Gardner said. "The House case is simply an evolution, and I think we'll continue to work towards the next destination, and we're not there yet."