

As Stanford Cuts Teams, Olympic Hopefuls All Over the U.S. Feel a Chill

If Stanford, which has deep resources and a reputation as a factory for Olympians, can't maintain its sports programs amid the pandemic, athletes fear that no one can.

By Juliet Macur

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Kyler Presho, a Stanford men's volleyball player, can't forget all the times university officials said they were in this together.

Stanford athletics was a family, they told him. Cardinal for life, they said. And he believed it.

That support and understanding are why he had made it a tradition to climb to the top of the stands before his home matches, look at the big "S" at midcourt and appreciate his life at a leading university where one in eight undergraduates play a varsity sport.

But last month, just weeks before his senior year started, Presho was blindsided when the university abruptly announced it was cutting men's volleyball and 10 other teams — nearly one-third of Stanford's 36 varsity programs. The last seasons of those sports would be in 2020-21, if the pandemic allowed, and Stanford said there would be no chance of saving the teams through fund-raising.

The cuts were a last resort, officials said, adding that the university would still honor students' scholarships and coaches' contracts. They blamed "the harsh new financial realities imposed by Covid-19" and a growing financial shortfall that they had been trying to stem for several years. Stanford projected a \$70 million deficit over the next three years if it did not cut the 11 teams.

"The perfect word to describe it was cruel," Presho said from his home in San Clemente, Calif. "I come from a broken home, and it feels like that kind of situation. The life you know is taken away from you in an instant. It felt like someone had died or something."

The decision by Stanford — to dump men's volleyball, men's and women's fencing, women's lightweight rowing, men's rowing, field hockey, squash, synchronized swimming, wrestling, and coed and women's sailing — didn't just break the hearts of the 240 athletes and 22 coaches directly affected by the decision. The move also sent chills through the Olympic community in the United States.



Presho's bag from Stanford sits at a beachside court in San Clemente, Calif. Christian Monterrosa for The New York Times

All of the cut sports except squash are in the Olympics, and for generations, Stanford has been an unofficial Olympian factory. Stanford athletes have won nearly 300 Olympic medals over all, and at the 2016 Summer Games they won more than athletes from any other university — 26 medals, 14 of them gold. Stanford has been known for churning out national team members and stars like the swimmer Katie Ledecky, the decathlete Bob Mathias, the softball player Jessica Mendoza and the beach volleyball player Kerri Walsh Jennings.

The men's volleyball team has won two N.C.A.A. championships and has featured 10 Olympians, more than two dozen players on the U.S. national team and a two-time coach of the Olympic team. Two Stanford alumni are on the national team right now, and two more could be in the running for next year's Summer Games in Tokyo.

"It's absolutely devastating to the Olympic pipeline," Alexander Massialas, a Stanford graduate and a two-time Olympic medalist in fencing, said of the university's decision.

The cuts effectively chipped away at a key part of the Olympic development model in the United States. At universities like Stanford, which offers more varsity sports than nearly any other American university, aspiring Olympians have the resources to train, while intercollegiate competition prepares them for an international stage. That arrangement is one of the ways the United States Olympic team gets by without centralized training programs as robust as those in other counties.

Stanford athletic department officials, through a spokeswoman, declined to comment about the cuts, but an online statement posted in July said the university had exhausted "all other viable avenues." The statement also said using the school's \$27.7 billion endowment wasn't an option because it was earmarked for other things, including financial aid, and because the university wanted its athletic department to cover its own expenses. It would cost more than \$200 million to keep the 11 varsity programs for good and ensure they are competitive, the university said.

The concern about Olympic sports is this: If Stanford, with its many billions of dollars and deep-pocketed donors, can't keep these sports afloat, how can universities with much less money and alumni support be expected to do the same? Erik Shoji, a former Stanford All-American volleyball player who won a bronze medal at the 2016 Olympics, said the university's decision could have a dangerous ripple effect.



“Who’s to say that Ohio State and Penn State wouldn’t cut their programs and blame Stanford for it?” said Erik Shoji, center, who won a bronze medal at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Sean M. Haffey/Getty Images

“Who’s to say that Ohio State and Penn State wouldn’t cut their programs and blame Stanford for it?” said Shoji, who is on the national team with his brother, Kawika, another Stanford graduate. “And then, from our sport’s point of view, if there’s no college volleyball, there’s no grass-roots volleyball, so we see some potentially terrible ramifications down the road for our sport.”

Dozens of universities have recently slashed sports that do not earn money, blaming the pandemic’s anticipated effect on revenue. Many universities fear that a canceled college football season would mean billions of dollars in lost revenue.

There’s no emergency for men’s volleyball just yet, said Jamie Davis, chief executive officer of U.S.A. Volleyball, the national governing body for the sport. He said he was confident that volleyball would keep growing on the high school level, with more boys joining after turning away from contact sports like football, where head injuries have become a concern.

Though only about 64,000 boys played volleyball in high school in 2018-19 — compared with 1.09 million boys playing football that school year — participation had increased by 22 percent over five years, while football participation decreased by 8 percent, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.

“The good news so far is that we haven’t seen a massive following of cuts after Stanford’s cuts,” Davis said. “But obviously these are tricky times for college sports in a world with Covid-19.”

Gerald Gurney, an assistant professor at the University of Oklahoma and former president of the Drake Group, which aims to ensure academic integrity for college athletes, isn't buying Stanford's excuse that the cuts were purely financially driven. If the university really wanted to, he said, it could have floated the programs through the pandemic and beyond, or accepted money raised by the sports themselves.

The cuts, Gurney said, revealed the university's "philosophical change of direction."

"What I see Stanford doing is developing a model more similar to any of the powerful football schools," said Gurney, who teaches classes on athletics in higher education and ethics in intercollegiate athletics. "They want more money, so they can devote it to football and basketball and not worry about the other sports. Ultimately what seems to matter in this new era is winning in football and basketball."

With 25 varsity teams remaining, Stanford still has a chance to win its 26th consecutive Director's Cup, an annual award given to the university with the most success in college athletics. Not that Stanford considers it a priority anymore, Gurney said.

"I suspect that Stanford's president decided that their Olympic approach in the long run is not going to meet the goals of the athletics department in terms of winning in revenue-generating sports," Gurney said, explaining that the university is, after all, ultimately concerned with making money. "When it comes to winning in football and basketball, there are no moral standards. The objective is to win at all costs."

The men's volleyball community is still trying to convince Stanford that it made a mistake.

More than 125 current and past players in the program have scrambled to raise money and support, with players like Presho writing letters to the university president, athletic director and board of directors to make a case to keep the team.

The push has yielded more than \$5.8 million in pledges, and current players continue to meet with the athletic director, Bernard Muir, according to Jeremy Jacobs, a former player who is the campaign's unofficial spokesman. More than 35,000 people have signed an online petition to keep the team.

"I think the university didn't view us as a popular sport, but regionally, it's very popular," said Ken Shibuya, the team's associate head coach and recruiting coordinator. "But the thing that really bugs me is that we're a low-cost program, we don't have an overload of kids — we only had 15 last season because of injuries — and our travel costs here within California are not that bad."

Shibuya said he is disappointed for the players, especially the recruits whom he was so excited to sign for this fall. Hunter Dickey, a junior transfer from Orange Coast College, is one of those recruits. When Dickey heard Stanford cut his future team, he and his mother wept.

"Playing at Stanford is a chance of a lifetime for me," he said in an interview. "So at first I was like, 'Are you kidding me? This can't be happening.'"

About 1 percent of students who applied to Stanford as transfers were accepted in 2019, and this year Dickey was one of the chosen few.

To save money while his father was between jobs, Dickey spent two years at Orange Coast, a junior college, while working as a bellhop at a Hilton hotel. It took him four months to finish his Stanford application. He wanted to make sure every word was just right.

Dickey did not expect his dream to play out as it has, with his new teammates welcoming him to Stanford by saying: "You are one of us. Now let's fight for our lives."

There is precedent to suggest their efforts might work.

After Bowling Green State cut its baseball team in May, players and alumni raised \$1.5 million over 18 days to save it. It took Brown University alumni 12 days to save the men's running programs.

But it has been nearly two months since Stanford's announcement, and the administration hasn't budged. If the decision is not reversed, officials said, any money raised could fund a club team. Current and former Stanford men's volleyball players can't bear to even think about that.

"Stanford University, at the end of the day, is a business, and they don't have to care about us," Presho said. "But we care. We care a lot and dedicated part of our lives to this team and university. And over so many years, with everybody telling us, 'Hey, guys, we're family,' we were made to think that they cared, too."

He paused before adding, "What they've done to 11 of their own communities in this time of need is telling."

Gillian R. Brassil contributed reporting.