

Episode 23: Cuts and Title IX compliance

In this week's episode of "The Weekly Rundown" our staff discusses the athletics department's proposal to eliminate three men's sports and the expected roster cuts to women's sports under the proposal.

Nolan O'Hara and Matthew Kennedy

INTRO MUSIC PLAYS

NOLAN O'HARA: Hello, and welcome back to another episode of the "Weekly Rundown," presented by the Minnesota Daily. I'm your host Nolan O'Hara. We had a bit of a hiccup with last week's episode, but that should be on our website now if you want to catch up on Gopher football. Today, I'm with one of our reporters Matt Kennedy. Matt, how's it going?

MATT KENNEDY: It's going good Nolan. Currently, in the heat of midterms, as I assume other students on campus at the University of Minnesota are doing, which can be stressful yet Gopher football's on the way back, which is exciting. And there's a ton of sports to watch right now with the NHL draft being on last night, the NBA Finals and MLB playoffs. So overall, it's a great time to be rabid sports follower like myself.

O'HARA: For sure, it's been it's been fun and looks like the Lakers are doing pretty good and football's been back and some fantasy football with our Daily sports league here.

KENNEDY: Yes.

O'HARA: But Matt's joining us here today mostly to discuss the upcoming Board of Regents meeting this Thursday and Friday. For those of you who haven't heard, the athletics department has proposed cutting three men's sports in indoor and outdoor track and field, gymnastics, tennis, citing financial difficulties amid the pandemic and Title IX compliance. After the athletics department made this announcement, there was a protest by student athletes, fans and supporters, who marched from Athletes Tillage to Morill Hall, where president Joan Gable's office is. Matt was on the ground covering the protest for us, and he recently broke some news regarding Title IX compliance that the athletic department cited in making these cuts. Matt, tell me a little bit about the athletic department's decision and these new developments you found out about Title IX compliance.



KENNEDY: Yes, so one of the big things that I talked with Regent Michael Hsu about this, and another one person I talked to Mike Burns, football being back fluctuates things a lot. This decision made by Mark Coyle was before he knew that Big Ten sports would be coming back, especially football. So it's the biggest revenue booster at the University of Minnesota. It accounts for two thirds of the athletic department's revenue in 2019 through 2020. So you'd think that this decision is pretty premature on just knowing that it was made before anyone knew that football would be returning. And it may have to delay this decision of discontinuing sports or maybe bring them back since there's a lot more money now coming back for the athletic department to thrive.

O'HARA: And your article that you wrote for this last week, it talked about Title IX compliance, and there are some kind of unannounced things that are happening there. Can you explain that situation a little bit?

KENNEDY: Yes. So I spoke with Michael Hsu – he's on the Board of Regents – on Sept. 27. Before this breaking news broke out that there besides gymnastics, track and field and tennis on the men's side being cut, there's also being major cuts on the women's side, including cross country losing about 14 of its members. So it would go down from 34 rostered members to 20. And indoor track and outdoor track, both losing 18 members. So the roster spots would go down from 68 to 50. And that was pretty unknown. And it was being kept in the dark by Mark Coyle, according to Michael Hsu, and you wanted to get that out there. And it's in my article, if you want to read more about it, but yeah, so it was pretty unexpected.

O'HARA: Yeah, make sure to check out Matt's article at mndaily.com. But back to the conversation with Hsu with those cuts. You said he was left in the dark because in the press releases they only mentioned you know that men's tennis, men's gymnastics, men's indoor and outdoor track. Did the Regents expect that women's cuts were going to go along with it? Or were they left in the dark like the rest of us?

KENNEDY: I think what Michael said to me was that this was apparently the plan from the beginning. And he was just when he talked to me on Sept. 27. Before my article came out about this issue, he said he knew about it and he actually he wanted to get this out as soon as possible. I feel like the Regents knew about it and nothing was being said, and Coyle also in his initial press conference about where he was really somber, had really somber announcement, talking about the discontinuation of men's track and field mentioned gymnastics, men's tennis. He never said anything about it. Pretty much, almost half of women's cross country team. Their roster spots being cut and a boatload of track and field athletes will probably have to be cut as well if this plan goes through.

O'HARA: So it's looking like as far as Title IX compliance, the U's kind of having to overcorrect itself and re-get-themselves back into compliance after cutting these three men's sports, right? And looking at it for the women's side, what does it mean for the sports that are facing cuts? You mentioned the cross country team, what other sports are facing cuts? And what can it mean for those programs?

KENNEDY: Yeah, so golf, which originally had nine will be cut down to eight, gymnastics, which originally had 20 will be cut down to 18. Rowing, actually, I missed that. That's another big sport that's facing cuts, that will go down from 75 to 60. So 15, roster spots will be cut. Softball, there will be two less roster spots. So we'll go from 23 to 21; swimming and diving will go from 38 to 30, it'll lose eight roster spots. So basically, these are all being cut to align with the fact that all these men's sports are being discontinued. There's 58, men's roster spots that just with coils current plan will not be there in 2021 through 2022 school year. And those sports, again, are being cut to get \$2.7 million back for the University to spend going forward. And many people think cutting the sports and also cutting women's roster spots just for \$2.7 million isn't enough, you're not getting enough money back for this.

O'HARA: That definitely led to a reaction from a lot of student athletes, fans, supporters of teams. And yeah, they will only save \$2.7 million this fiscal year. So, there isn't a lot of money coming back. And I remember talking to Mike Burns, a coach we've checked in pretty frequently with, at the protest. And he was saying, just with that information about the football team being back that they should delay the vote. I know you've spoken to him recently, again, he's been very vocal about trying to save not only his program, but gymnastics programs across the country. Right. When you talked to him again, what were some ideas that he had to save the program? What did he say? And I know he sent you some new information as well.

KENNEDY: Right so, before we get into Mike Burns, I also want to say they're also are being on some men's sports, even there are some more popular men's sports roster spots being added. So, basketball is getting two roster spots, football's getting one roster spot added, same with men's ice hockey, one roster spot added, and also wrestling two roster spots adds. So, that's also something that I think it's good that people should be aware of. But no, Mike Burns is not happy camper right now and for good reason. Because last year there, I would have to say 15 NCAA Men's gymnastics programs offered around the country, and they're slowly being reduced even further due to COVID-19. I know I will just cut their program. That's one of them. So 80% of all Olympic gymnasts in the USA come from these programs. And according to him, and pretty much everybody else around gymnastics, that's a pretty big deal. So he along with Hsu and others are in favor of trimming roster spots on these men's teams and offering fewer scholarship money to athletes. And he had this great quote that you can also find in my article that says, "If you have a piece of skin cancer on your face, let's not cut the whole head off. Let's just focus on that piece of skin." So, he's very, very unhappy right now.

O'HARA: Yeah, and understandably so. I'm looking at it, they do need to fall into Title IX compliance, but basically, Burns is offering the [University] a number of other solutions that will put them in compliance without cutting entire programs. The only question with that is the fiscal cost. And many would argue that the money you're saving the \$2.7 million this fiscal year, it's not worth saving, or rather for the 2021-2022 school year when the cuts would take place, that is not worth losing three men's programs for, and just overall there have been a number of new developments since the athletics department announced this proposal. The first development being that Big Ten football returned. It's going to be a huge financial boost for the department. That's the biggest money making sport that the U offers. And now both the basketball and hockey seasons are expected to proceed as well. The Big Ten hockey team just announced their season start date. And that will also help with the financial picture. And now we're seeing that they're expecting to cut make cuts to women's programs as well. So with the conflicts, the department's claim of needing to meet Title IX compliance, and then seeing that they're also expecting to cut women's roster spots, that that kind of throws out their claim of saying this is this is solely because of Title IX compliance and financial issues. So looking at all these, you know, new developments, are you expecting any changes with the Board, they previously endorsed the proposal? Do you think any of these developments will change their minds?

KENNEDY: You have to keep in mind that the University of Minnesota offers the fourth largest Big Ten sports opportunities for students compared to all the other schools in the Big Ten. And but it's on the eighth largest budget in the conference. So, I think that this protest by the teams will be successful. Though, given that the school's needing a budgetary boost, the discontinuation of track and field gymnastics and men's team, again, it only alots \$2.7 million in savings. So there needs to be, in my opinion, more time to figure out how to save more money in the long run, without the huge downer of cutting sports for again, such a small gain. Because Michael Hsu, and Mike Burns are both in agreement that they need more time they need to see where this goes. And they can maybe go back to the drawing room, you know, after the 2020 through 2021 academic year.

O'HARA: Right. That was that was one thing Burns reiterated to me last time I spoke with him. He was just saying, you know, there's time, there's no need to push anything through right now. And we'll see where it goes in the future. And we will have to wait and see but for not very long because the Board is expected to vote on this proposal. And its meeting that takes place this Friday and Saturday rather Thursday and Friday.

KENNEDY: Yeah. And also, I'll just add this in there. Mike Burns also has a really in depth 26 page proposal on three models that can help not only save the gymnastics program, but other programs that got discontinued as well.

O'HARA: For sure, I remember reading that the other day he does, he sent Matt a couple of proposals that he thinks could be helpful in not losing three sports and just trimming roster spots or he's even had some other ideas as well. But we'll definitely be there for the coverage on the Regents' vote this Thursday and Friday. And make sure so make sure to check our website, mndaily.com for all updates and anything Gopher sports. Matt, really appreciate you joining me, appreciate you coming in.

KENNEDY: No problem. My pleasure Nolan.

OUTRO MUSIC PLAYS

O'HARA: In other news: The Gophers rowing team has announced its captains for the 2020-21 season. Meade Avery, Lindsay Eliassen and Gabby Mullally will lead the team this season. Gophers' wide receiver Demetrius Douglas has opted out of the 2020 Big Ten football season. Douglas graduates this fall and is planning to focus on his life after school. More football players are yet to decide whether to play in 2020. Head coach P.J. Fleck wouldn't name names, saying he wants players to make the decision for themselves. Gophers freshman defenseman Brock Faber was selected in the NHL Draft with the 45th overall pick by the Los Angeles Kings. The Big Ten announced the start date to its 2020-21 season, beginning as soon as Nov. 13. There will be a 24 game conference schedule, and four additional games against independent Arizona State. That's all for this week. Be sure to check our website mndaily.com and tune in again next week for the "Weekly Rundown" on all things Gopher sports.