

Building a future

Lamar athletics honors past achievement while looking ahead

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Throughout the 100 years since Lamar University's founding in 1923, sports have played an integral part of the college's story.

Whether it's baseball's dominant run under legendary manager Jim Gilligan, men's basketball making national waves in the late '70s and early '80s, or cross-country and golf ripping off dynastic runs across the 2000s, there's plenty of history in the Cardinal record books.

"There's certainly a long history of traditions and success here," LU athletic director Jeff O'Malley said. "We're looking to build upon the success that we've had, and take it to the next level to give our student athletes the best possible experience here.

"I really haven't stepped back to look at my job as the guardian of tradition, but when you put it that way, we certainly are. It's certainly a proud way to think of it."

Respecting a century of Lamar athletic history is a point of focus, especially this year. Team marketing materials have incorporated the centennial logo into their content, and Lamar's football helmets will sport a commemorative decal alongside the university logo as a nod to the Beaumont community.

O'Malley also recognized the importance of connecting with former Cardinal athletes and making them feel they're still part of the Lamar family.

"We love to welcome them back with open arms and show them around," O'Malley said. "They built the foundation of what Lamar athletics is now. If we can show them what their participation and success did at the time, and they see what we're doing now, (it makes) them feel proud about what they've done, I think that certainly goes a long way."

The athletics program can't live exclusively in the past, though. Being present in the moment and preparing for the future are both crucial. Thus, O'Malley and Lamar University President Jaime Taylor are working together to chase on-field success while improving the experience of student-athletes and fans alike.

Lamar's transition back to the Southland Conference a year and a half ago was an encouraging sign for the future.

Since then, women's soccer and track & field have claimed conference championships. Cardinal baseball, cross-country, and women's basketball are consistent challengers. Football and men's hoops have reason to be optimistic with the direction the programs are headed.

Off the playing field, significant improvements have been made to LU athletics facilities. Provost Umphrey Stadium received an impressive new video board and sound system. Upgraded lighting and a new basketball court were installed at the Montagne Center, with video board and sound system updates yet



UP photo by Brian Quijada

The Lamar University football team takes the field pre-game before facing the Idaho University Vandals, Aug. 31, at Provost Umphrey Stadium in Beaumont.

to come.

"Those things help to present a first class atmosphere for our student-athletes and for our fans," O'Malley said. "If you're trying to be first class, you need to present yourself in a first-class manner. That's certainly something that we want to do."

Of course, the landscape of college athletics is constantly changing — and folks, it moves fast.

Television and streaming rights have created a world where other universities throw out longstanding tradition and regional conference ties in the pursuit of the almighty dollar. Texas and

Oklahoma are on their way to the Southeastern Conference and the Atlantic Coastal Conference is welcoming Pacific-coast schools. Realignment has decimated the PAC-12, which should more appropriately be named the PAC-4.

Meanwhile, name, image and likeness laws allow players to profit off their talents. While this much-needed change was a long time coming, it creates a perhaps unfair advantage for the schools with the wealthiest donors.

The NCAA's rapid transformation leaves the future of college athletics in somewhat murky waters. Frankly, it's impossible to predict what other changes may occur in the

coming years.

"I don't know what the future is going to look like," O'Malley said. "I think there's a lot of people that feel the same way, especially with NIL and conference realignment. The one thing that I'm certain of is that it's going to continue to evolve.

"But from our standpoint of where Lamar is in the Southland, I think we're in a really good spot with our league under the leadership of Commissioner (Chris) Grant. We have a lot of like-minded institutions in our league. We seem to be on the same page a lot and I think that bodes really well for the cohesiveness of the Southland Conference."

Lamar sports through the ages

Compiled from UP archives

Like most beginnings of collegiate athletic programs 100 years ago, the programs of South Park Junior College made its debut without much fanfare other than the interest created in Beaumont.

Lamar's athletic success began with a football victory as SPJC beat South Park High School's Greenies 25-0 on

Sept. 29, 1923, at the old Magnolia Ball Park, which stood at Magnolia Avenue and Hazel Street.

Albeit against a high school team, SPJC's first victory seems a spectacular feat when player size is considered. The heaviest athlete on the '23 team weighed a scant 155 pounds, and he played the quarterback position.

The junior college had

fielded a football team from 1923 to 1926, playing two or three games a year against area high schools and the freshmen teams of four-year colleges. But after a couple of seasons of low attendance, football was dropped after the '26 season.

In 1932, football was reinstated at Lamar, and young John Gray, who was in South Park's first class and would later serve as the university's president, was hired as head coach and athletic director. Gray changed the team's name from the original "Brahmas" to the "Cardinals," and the team colors from maroon and gray to red and blue. (Later, during the '60s, the colors were changed to red and white.)

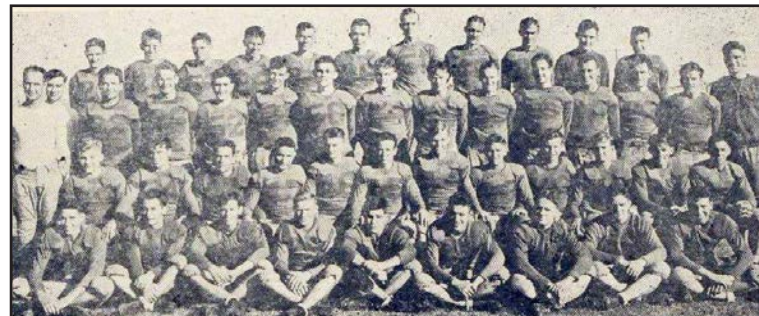
Football reigned at Lamar in the early 1930s with John Gray's 1932 team posting an 8-1 record and the 1933 and 1934 clubs advancing to the junior college state finals.

Despite the success, athletic monies were hard to come by. The students recorded their fundraising attempts to garner money for letter sweaters, as donated by Gray and jerseys. They had at least four fundraisers in the school year. Like the scores of the early games, these fundraisers were sometimes successful and other times not.

Despite winning multiple Southland titles in the late 1970s and early 80s, football was dropped following the 1989 season. The program returned in 2010. LU advanced to the FCS playoffs in 2018.

Lamar's rise from the dust of South Park Junior College's Magnolia Park facility to a level of competing against the nation's major universities on the NCAA's Division I level tells quite a success story.

Historically, the Cardinals



The Lamar University football poses for a team photo in 1933. UP file photo

have been strong in basketball, even making appearances in the NCAA's "Elite Eight" during the 1979-80 season behind the coaching of Billy Tubbs and the strong play of Alvin Brooks, Clarence Kea, and Mike Oliver, a first round NBA pick. The 1990-91 women's basketball team made it's own "Elite Eight" run. Since then, the Lady Cards have won four conference championships.

Successes had on the baseball diamond are extensive. Al Vincent proved instrumental in reviving the baseball program in 1971, and his protégé, Jim Gilligan, made winning a spring tradition at Lamar. The Cardinals have claimed 10 Southland regular season championships since then, also appearing in the NCAA tournament 13 times.

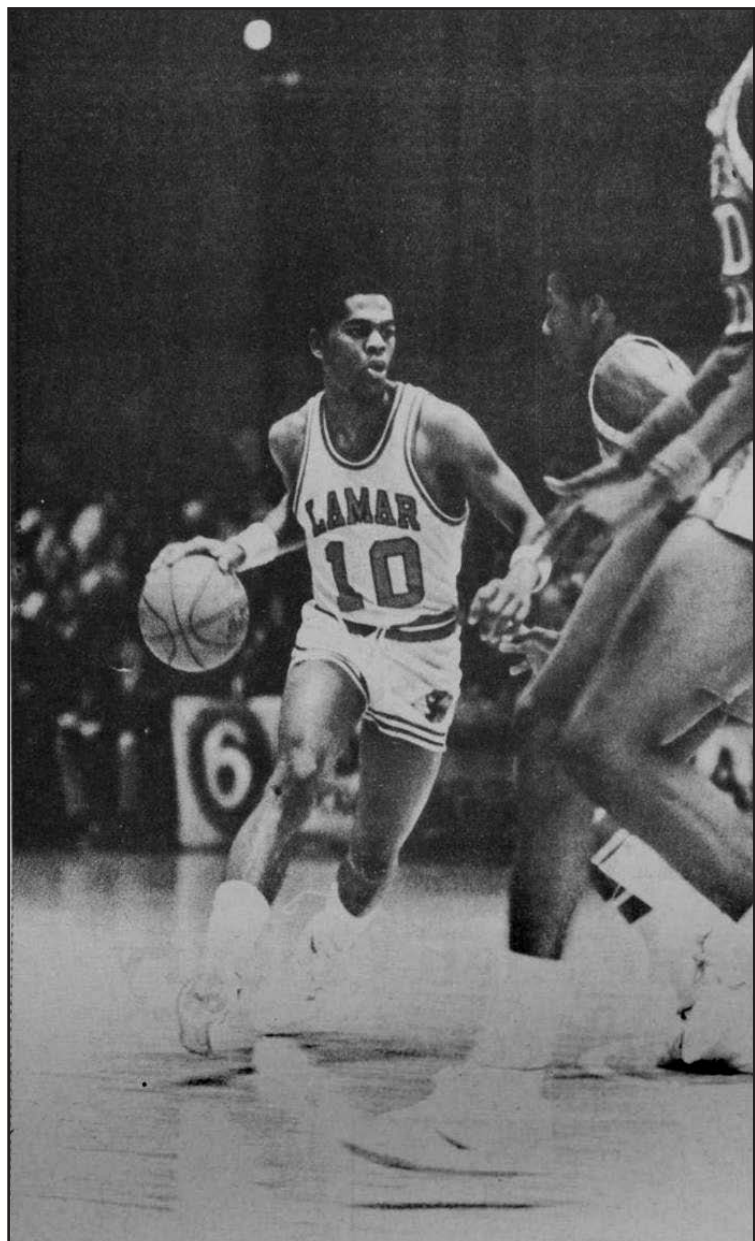
Other sports have also seen glory days. Cardinal golf holds

24 Southland titles and won the conference seven out of 10 years between 2001 and 2009. Women's golf also leads the Southland Conference with seven team championships.

Track & field and cross-country have also been a point of Cardinal pride. Lamar's men have won a Southland-leading 16 combined indoor/outdoor track & field championships. Women's track & field won their first-ever SLC title in 2023.

Lately, women's soccer has become one of Lamar's most accomplished teams. The program was instated in 2007. The Cardinals won the SLC regular season and tournament championships in 2017, 2019 and 2022.

LU has maintained a tradition of excellence through the ages, a tradition that looks set to continue.



Lamar's Mike Oliver tries to find an opening through the Southwestern Louisiana defense during a game in the 1979 season. UP file photo



The Lady Cardinals celebrate the Southland Conference tournament win, Nov. 6, 2022, in Natchitoches, Louisiana. UP file photo