

Stanford students turn to protests, graffiti to preserve 11 sports targeted for cuts

Ann Killion



A crowd of students gathered in the Stanford quad on Monday afternoon, to protest the university's decision to drop 11 sports.

“Stop the cuts, stop the cuts” they chanted outside the office of university president Marc Tessier-Lavigne. Tessier-Lavigne was expected to meet with the Board of Trustees on Monday to discuss reconsidering the controversial decision to eliminate almost a third of the university’s teams.

For much of the past year, the Stanford campus has been largely empty, which worked to the advantage of athletic director Bernard Muir and the Stanford leaders who abruptly decided to drop 11 varsity sports last July. “Under cover of the pandemic” seemed to be an effective strategy.

But more and more students are now back on campus and making their voices heard.

“This was definitely the first of many opportunities for us to express ourselves,” said senior men’s volleyball player Kyler Presho, who was part of the rally. “These sports are something the Stanford community wants and they’re going to keep hearing from us.”

The protest wasn’t just verbal. The yellow sandstone was covered in graffiti: “36 Sports Strong,” “You Can’t Cut Me,” “Let Us Play.”

Desecration of the pristine Stanford campus? Don’t worry, it was chalk spray, and many students went back with mops and buckets and cleaned up the historic buildings.

But it was symbolic. Many feel that what wealthy Stanford has done to its athletic programs is a desecration of the university's name and once stellar reputation.

"As photos show, chalk can be cleaned with soap and water; cutting 11 sports can't," said Jeremy Jacobs, spokesman for 36SportsStrong. "We ask President Tessier-Lavigne and the Board to update the Stanford community as soon as possible, and to indicate they'll work with us to reinstate the 11 teams."

This has been a sad spring for Stanford athletics. In a condensed calendar, sport after sport is completing their truncated seasons, many with bids for national championships.

That, of course, is supposed to be the norm for Stanford, "home of champions." The school crows about its 25 straight Director's Cup titles, about how it is a pipeline to the Olympics, how it sets a standard of excellence.

But nothing is the norm these days for Stanford athletics. A pact has been broken and even the athletes who are "safe" from the proposed cuts are upset.

Last week, the men's gymnastics team won a national title, and chose to wear "36SportsStrong," t-shirts while it celebrated its championship.

For the sports designated for the axe, any success only adds to the anger and frustration. The synchronized swimming team won another national championship; the entire crowd chanted "Save Stanford Synchro." Wrestlers, also slated for extinction, came to the aquatic center holding up a banner condemning Muir. When wrestler Shane Griffith won a national championship last month, he turned his singlet inside out so as not to show the Stanford logo.

The women's field hockey team, also deemed expendable, has spent most of the past month on the East Coast. The team won its conference title in double overtime last week, earning a spot in the NCAA tournament, which begins later this week. When the players raised their hard-won banner, they affixed black tape over the Stanford "S" making it clear that they were shunning the Stanford name.

A more poignant moment came in Provo, Utah last week, when the men's volleyball team dropped their match to Pepperdine in the conference tournament. The loss ended the season; the players were clearly gutted. They had taken the court with black duct tape over their Stanford logo and the Stanford name and many of the fans wore "SaveStanfordMVB" shirts

The once-coveted Stanford logo and name is now something to be hidden. The list of accessories for a Stanford athlete has grown: Mouthguard. Socks. Black duct tape. Broken heart.

“It was heartbreaking,” Presho said of his final match.

“We weren’t playing that one for Stanford. We were playing for ourselves.”

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