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'You can take our status, but not our passion': Athletes discuss the transition from cut sports to club sports

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Voices of the Newsroom: Navigating the shift from Division 1 to club sports
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The Men's Cross Country team had their last meet as a Division I team back in May. However, just five months later, they are training and competing at the club level.

Photo via Christian Gutierrez

In the press release that announced that six sports — men's cross country, women's track and field, men's track and field, women's rowing, men's rowing and women's swimming — would not be returning to LMU for the 2024-25 season came an alternative that would give athletes an opportunity to continue competing athletically: the ability to maintain their team at a club sport level.

For the athletes and teams affected, this would mean the funding that accompanied their once-Division I sport would be taken away, and instead, everything from practices to budgets would be almost completely organized by the club teams themselves.

"Club sports are led and organized by students. Team practices, meetings, competitions, budgets and fundraisers are organized, managed and led by club officers and club members," states LMU's club sports' page.

Despite this, four out of six sports decided to make the transition — women's and men's rowing — who are competing as one team — as well as men's cross country and women's swimming. Running a club sport would be a new experience for the previous NCAA athletes, but even just the process of starting up the club sport was taxing in itself.

"The process was sort of split into two parts. You had to register the club [sport] as a club, first of all, and then you also had to register with club sports, so it was two very long processes. The forms aren't actually complicated or hard to get done, but since we didn't exist as a club sport before, almost all of the forms didn't include an option for rowing," said Club Rowing President Joey Malloy. "I had to repeatedly reach out to the offices to ask them about putting us on the form so we could actually fill it out, so it was a long process of paperwork and dealing with the office not being able to accept the paperwork for a multitude of reasons."

Men's Cross Country had to complete the extensive paperwork as well, however, because their last season as a Division I sport at LMU only officially ended in May, they fell behind in the process and scrambled to catch up.

"The one thing that was difficult was getting all of the paperwork organized and leveraging who you know in the club sports office to help you out because it turns out that due to the timing of it all, we missed some important deadlines to register, so we had to work backwards and start from a weird place," said Men's Cross Country Club President and Co-Captain Will Luders.

After sitting through meetings, filling out paperwork and acquiring signatures, the sports had transitioned into club sports. However, coming from a fully funded program with resources meant to help Division I teams compete at their highest level, the athletes realized that the resources that were available to them as club sport athletes had changed drastically.

“We have a great group of guys, and we have a great coaching staff, obviously, that hasn’t changed. What has changed is that we have a very hard cut, to where we no longer have access to the same resources we had. We can’t get treated properly for injuries that come up with [training, and] we don’t get the same facilities,” said Luders.



The Club Rowing team is still able to use LMU's boathouse in Marina del Rey, along with boats that have been donated by alumni for their daily training on the water.

Photo via Emilia Valmas

The resources that Luders refers to is extensive for LMU's Division I athletes — according to Luders, student-athletes get travel costs covered by the University, they train in their own weightlifting facilities and they have a designated training room to assist with injuries and other health-related issues. However, the lack of facilities has affected some teams in the transition more than others, such as the newly formed Club Rowing team.

“Rowing is a really different sport in comparison to the other sports that got cut. It's not really the kind of sport that you can just go out there and do. We have really, really expensive equipment, we have a whole boathouse, we need to have a safety launch with us when we go out [to row], it's a whole process. Working with the University, [we're] trying to get them to understand that it's not as simple [to] just create a club team and go out there and row, it's not like that,” said Emilia Valmas, a rower for the Club Rowing team.

Lack of facilities was not the only thing that set Club Rowing back — the team is also currently operating without a coach, a piece that is integral for Club Rowing to receive proper training. However, because of the lack of steady funding that the club rowing team receives, the search for a coach has grown increasingly harder.

“The sport of rowing is very involved. You need to be out on the water and in order to do that safely, you need a coach trailing you with all the safety equipment and safety training. For rowing, [not having a coach] is not really an option. We've managed to find some coaches, but they haven't been fully involved with the team yet as we're trying to work out sustainable revenue for the club. They want the guarantee of job security, and following all the rules of club sports — we're not able to give them that,” said Malloy.

The change in resources was only one facet that the new club sports had to field — LMU's decision to cut six sports caused many athletes to stop competing or transfer to other universities in order to continue competing, and because of this, the club sports also had to focus on recruiting. For club sports like cross country, though, it was not a matter of forming a completely new squad but rather rallying the athletes that formerly played on the Division I team.

“We did create the club team, sort of as a temporary solution ... It’s a way to get the guys we still have, the guys who haven’t left yet, the guys who have been, quite frankly ... trapped here by this decision ... who still want to do the sport that they came to LMU solely to practice,” said Luders. “We wanted to create that environment so that those guys can still train, actually get better, race and fulfill the passion that they came to LMU for in the very first place.”

“My teammate [Matt Martinez] and I [are] both captains, [and] I think the role that we have apart from formally organizing the club and taking care of all the administration stuff ... is to give people hope. We got the people who were obviously left behind by [LMU Athletics], [and] we’re still training everyday, we’re still hoping to race in track season, all while still fighting for reinstatement,” said Luders.

Meanwhile, the presidents of Club Rowing are taking on the training of their team by themselves. The team is made up of five previous Division I athletes who walked onto the rowing teams, like Malloy and Valmas; however, the rest of the team are newcomers that have minimal to no rowing experience.

“We’ve basically been teaching the freshmen how to row on the Ergs at [Burns Recreation Center]. We’re coaching the new freshmen, we’re running the training. These freshmen girls, that was me two years ago. I know how rowing changed my life joining it my freshman year, and I was like, absolutely, I want to give that opportunity to other girls,” said Valmas.



The five rowers coming from the Division I men's and women's teams — Malloy, Valmas, Khaled Alghanem, Sorin Thompson and Shane Rivera — competed at the Head of the Charles Regatta the weekend of Oct. 18.

Photo via Emilia Valmas

Despite the challenges that came with the transition of the club sports, though, the athletes are still getting to do one of the things they love most — compete. And, although costs of tournaments and travel expenses are things the athletes have to navigate themselves, they have not let it stop them.

“We have raced a total of three cross country races this season, which, to most standards, is pretty low, but we're just fine with that. [Not getting travel costs covered] makes [competing] expensive, but it means we have to bootstrap. We're very committed to our sport and we're willing to make it work. We actually had our most recent meet in San Jose, my hometown — we actually traveled there and stayed at my house. There [were] four of us who stayed at my place, and we raced the next day, and [came] back to LMU,” said Luders.

This past weekend, club rowing participated in the Head of the Charles Regatta, one the biggest regattas in the world. Although they did not compete under the name of LMU — they competed under the Los Angeles Rowing Club's name — the tournament was an opportunity that would not have been afforded to them had they still been competing under NCAA rules.

“The whole trip was entirely self-funded, outside of the school, and we mainly did it as a last hurrah for a couple seniors on our team, as well as to motivate us to actually get the club to go there for real next year. We're looking to do a lot of good regattas in the spring, and for the most part, a lot of those regattas are going to be the exact same ones that we competed at as a [Division I] team,” said Malloy.

Although the journey from January to October has been one of the most unprecedented times seen in LMU Athletics thus far, the passion that the athletes had nine months ago has not faded at all. For many, if not all of the athletes, the opportunity to continue the sport they love is a silver lining in the midst of the fog.

“Just being able to continue rowing and to build this program; to [have] new walk-ons and freshmen join [the team] and have that same experience that we had when [we] first started to get a grip of what the [rowing] is and what it means to be a team is very connecting, so that has been super motivating for us,” said Valmas.

“A lot of these guys, they came to LMU to run for four years, and we’re going to make it happen one way or another. That’s the one thing that LMU Athletics can’t necessarily take away from us. They can’t take away our shoes, and they can’t take away the asphalt in LA. That’s all we really need to train,” said Luders.

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