

HURRICANES

MAGAZINE

WINTER 2024





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Dan Radakovich
DAN RADAKOVICH
VICE PRESIDENT & DIRECTOR OF ATHLETICS

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A LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR OF ATHLETICS



Welcome to the latest edition of *Hurricanes Magazine!*

As we flip the calendar to 2024, we are spotlighting many of the top stories from our winter and spring sports, including men's basketball center Norchad Omier, our women's basketball quartet from Canada, and NCAA diving champion Mia Vallée. We also catch up with former volleyball standout Savannah Leaf and check in with J.D. Arteaga as he embarks on his first season as our head baseball coach.

Our men's and women's basketball teams are in the thick of ACC play as they point towards another postseason run. Our swimming and diving, men's and women's indoor track and men's and women's tennis teams are also in action. There is excitement surrounding our football program, which just signed another Top 5 recruiting class.

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I hope you enjoy this edition of *Hurricane Magazine* and I hope to see you cheering on the Canes throughout the winter months!

Thank you again for your continued support and Go Canes!

Dan Radakovich
Vice President / Director of Athletics

Dan Radakovich



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Chasing a Dream: Norchad Omier

By Christy Cabrera Chirinos

A lot had changed for Norchad Omier since he'd last visited home.

He made history as the first Nicaraguan-born basketball player to earn a Division I scholarship. He had a breakout season at Arkansas State, where he earned recognition as both the Sun Belt Player of the Year and the Sun Belt Defensive Player of the Year.

He challenged himself by transferring to Miami where he quickly endeared himself to not only his teammates, but the South Florida community. And in March, he helped the Hurricanes make history of their own when they advanced to the Final Four for the first time.

Given all of that, Omier expected there might have been a little bit of a buzz this past summer when he returned to Nicaragua for the first time in two years.

Turns out, the welcome was warmer than he could have ever imagined.

"It was so different. A lot of people know me now," Omier recalled with a chuckle. "They see me on the street and ask me for photos. That was a little bit weird. I thought I would just go home, have fun with some of my family and relax. It turned out to be a little overwhelming, but it still made me feel good because I know I'm doing good things.

"It was nostalgic, too. ... It's been a long road from where I was a couple years ago to where I am now. I'm just thankful to the Lord and I'm happy. But I can't get comfortable at the same time. Still, it's all shown me that no matter where you come from, if you can dream big and work hard for it, anything is possible."

Omier, a 6-foot-7 big man for the Hurricanes, has become a testament to the power of big dreams and hard work.



He grew up a baseball-playing phenom in Bluefields, a port and seaside community in eastern Nicaragua. He always figured his strength, size and power on the pitching mound would open doors for him and pave the way for him to potentially, become a professional athlete.

But everything changed when those same attributes caught the attention of a local basketball coach who happened to stumble on a casual baseball game Omier was playing with his friends.

The coach got out of his car, asked Omier if he'd ever considered basketball and before long, Omier found himself at a camp in Nicaragua trying to learn the ins and outs of a sport that, to that point, he'd only occasionally played on nearby neighborhood courts and playgrounds.

Despite his athleticism and height, basketball proved a challenge.

Omier struggled, initially, with dribbling and ball movement. Shooting didn't come easy either.

But after a year of training, he noticed a shift.

"I was just figuring stuff out, but then, my second year, I was winning scoring championships in my hometown," Omier said. "Best rebounder, best free throw shooter. When all that started to happen, my second year playing, I was like, 'Damn, that's crazy.' I didn't know I could pick it up so fast."

Before long, the dream of playing professional baseball was replaced by the dream to play professional basketball. The next question Omier faced was how to make that dream a reality.

There were thoughts of playing in Mexico, before a visit to South Florida changed things.

While in Miami with Wesley Savery – one of his mentors and the former vice president of the Basketball Federation of Nicaragua – Omier attended a basketball camp where he earned recognition as the event's most valuable player.

In attendance at the camp was Art Alvarez, the coach at post-graduate Miami Prep.

Omier made an immediate impression and Alvarez knew he wanted the big man on his roster.

After conversations with Omier, his family and Savery it became clear: Mexico was out of the picture. Omier would attend Miami Prep and hopefully, earn himself a college scholarship in the process.

At Miami Prep, Omier notched a double-double in all 46 of his appearances. He averaged 26.7 points and 20.3 rebounds and led his team to a 41-5 record – and did it all while battling homesickness and even wondering if he'd made the right decision in coming to the States.

His family – including his father Halstead, his mother Norma, and his siblings Bezaleel and Anesha – encouraged him to stay strong.

"In the beginning, I was like, 'Yes, Mom, I want to go. Yes, Dad, I want to go.' There was no question," Omier said. "But when I got here, that's when it hit me and that's when it became hard. I spoke with them every day to stay close to my family. That helped. They always reminded me



to never forget about God, to pray every day and to keep working hard for my dream."

Omier powered through his personal discomfort, but another challenge loomed.

The COVID-19 pandemic took its toll on every part of life, including college basketball recruiting.

He wasn't able to take any official visits and coaches weren't able to see him play in person.

Omier ultimately signed with Arkansas State, where he played for then-Red Wolves coach Mike Balado, a Miami native who spoke fluent Spanish.

That comfort level helped Omier transition to the college game and just as he had in Bluefields, and just

as he had at that camp in Miami, the forward made an impact immediately.

In his first season at Arkansas State, he averaged 12.6 points, 12.3 rebounds, 1.2 steals and 1.4 blocks in 23 games. He was honored as the Sun Belt Freshman of the Year and earned a spot on the All-Sun Belt First Team.

He returned to Nicaragua that summer to compete with the Nicaraguan National Team and later, as a second-year freshman at Arkansas State, averaged 17.9 points and 12.2 rebounds.

It was after that season – and after being recognized as his conference's top player – that Omier wondered if it was time to challenge himself and play at a bigger program.

He entered his name into the transfer portal and Florida State, Georgetown, West Virginia, and Texas Tech were among the programs who expressed interest.

But a trip back to Miami, a conversation with head coach Jim Larrañaga and some time with the Hurricanes made it abundantly clear: he belonged in Coral Gables.

"There were a lot of factors – the coaching staff, the teammates. Even on my visit, they made me feel like I was already one of them. They made me feel like I was in the right spot. There were a lot of factors and Miami checked all the boxes," Omier said. "And Coach L, he was more than a coach. I saw that he was a teacher. ... From day one, he told me 'I'm not one of those types of coaches that yell and get up in your face. If you don't know some-



thing, I'm going to show you the right way to do it.' He was more like a teacher than a coach and I really liked that."

Miami, it turned out, really liked Omier, too.

He quickly settled in, both on his new team and in his new home.

In his first season with the Hurricanes – and his first season in the ultra-competitive ACC – he averaged 13.1 points and 10.0 rebounds, along with 1.3 assists, 1.1 blocks and 1.1 steals.

He notched a team-best 16 double-doubles and earned a spot on the Associated Press All-ACC second team. He also helped fuel a history-making March Madness run that neither he, nor his teammates and coaches, will forget about any time soon.

More than that, he embraced his role as a pioneer in South Florida's Nicaraguan community.

He introduced his teammates to Nicaraguan food and before long, noticed he was being recognized while out and about, particularly at Nicaraguan restaurants.

It became commonplace to see his home country's blue and white flag waving or emblazoned on shirts in the Watsco Center during Miami's home games. And before long, Omier started seeing his country's colors on road trips, with fans waiting after games in places like South Bend, Indiana, and Atlanta for the chance to, hopefully, snag a photo or exchange handshakes with the affable big man.

And for his part, Omier tried to oblige the requests as often as he could.

It was something his teammates and coaches understood – and supported.

"He's such a unique individual," Larrañaga said. "His personality is magnetic. I mean, he's really a genuine person who you like being around. He smiles all the time. He's happy all the time. He engages with everybody. You could be an 8-year-old, he's going to be friendly to you. You could be an 80-year-old, he's going to be friendly to you. ... I think he takes great pride in being from his home country and I think he takes great pride in coming here and establishing himself as a quality basketball player. I would not be surprised if one day he went back to Nicaragua and had his own basketball camp and tried to help other kids pursue their dream of maybe coming to America the way he did."

Added Hurricanes guard Nijel Pack, Omier's roommate, "He's done a great job of being focused, but also taking in everybody's support at the same time. I feel like that could be a lot of pressure on one person, knowing so many people are watching you. ... He takes the time to take pictures with fans and interact with kids and I feel like he's using his platform in a really great way. We always joke with him and say he's going to be the next president in Nicaragua because he gets so much love and things like that. His people always show great support and we're all really appreciative of that, as a team."

Last year, when Miami's history-making run came to an end in

the Final Four in Houston, Omier once again found himself with a decision to make.

Was it time to pursue his goal of playing in the NBA or should he return to Miami for another season?

He went through the NBA's pre-draft process and worked out for a handful of teams without hiring an agent in order to preserve his college eligibility. He went to the G League Combine, where he underwent testing similar to that at the NBA Combine.

But even as he awaited feedback from those in the professional ranks, Omier couldn't help but feel as if his work at Miami wasn't finished. Not yet.

"I feel like, first of all, what made me want to come back was that I think we didn't finish the job," Omier said. "When you taste victory and you reach so far in the NCAA Tournament, but you come up short, that was one of the reasons that motivated me to come back. We reached so far, but we didn't finish it."

With his decision ultimately made to return to Miami, Omier took the knowledge he gained during the pre-draft process and set about continuing to grow his game.

He spent the summer working to better his 3-point shooting. He worked on his defense, particularly on the perimeter. And he tried to improve his ball-handling skills.

All of that, Omier knows, will not only help him become a more intriguing NBA prospect, but will help the Hurricanes as they work their



way through the ACC schedule with the hopes of putting together another deep tournament run come March.

He's also worked to develop his leadership skills and find his voice as one of the veterans in Miami's locker room.

That, his teammates say, has been a natural progression for him.

"Nor Chad plays so hard that everybody tends to listen to him," Pack said. "He's a person that plays really, really hard and gives his heart out every game. So, it kind of makes it easy for him. He knows what he's talking about. He has a high IQ. Basically, when he speaks what he feels and what he sees on the court, everybody has the respect to listen to what he's saying and

try to go out and do it to the best of their abilities."

Said Omier, "For me, being a good leader is about leading by example. Cheer everybody up. Difficult times are going to come, but we have to stick together. Hard times are always going to be there. We have to figure out, together, how to get out of those hard times."

More than once, Omier has shown his ability to respond to challenges, often doing it with a broad smile.

He learned a new sport when some in his homeland told him to stick with the familiar. He came to a foreign country to pursue his dream of playing basketball and navigated being away from his family. When he excelled in his first two seasons as a college player in the United

States, he looked to take his game even further by facing off against opponents in the toughest basketball conference in the country.

Now, he wants to make sure he brings Miami a championship before he sets his sights on the next steps of his basketball journey.

"I just want to win, no matter what. If I get my job done – the dirty work – hit a couple open shots, push the ball down the court, find people open and just have fun with my teammates, then all I want to do is win," Omier said. "There's a lot for us to accomplish this year. The regular season, the ACC Tournament, the NCAA Tournament, and then win a national championship, easy as that."



Canadian Canes: Finding a Home 1,500 Miles South

By Brock Borgeson

Being the southernmost NCAA Division I institution in the contiguous United States, Miami does not come off as the natural choice for a prospective Canadian student-athlete during the recruiting process.

But, if you think about it for a women's basketball player, why not?

With it comes the opportunity to play in the Atlantic Coast Conference among some of the nation's best, all while living in an international city that barely sees the temperature drop below 55 degrees Fahrenheit all year. Miami's winning history, including last season's program-record setting Elite Eight run, only adds to the allure.

For Hurricanes Shayeann Day-Wilson, Lashae Dwyer, Latasha Lattimore and Lemyah Hylton, those reasons rang true and now, the Ontario-quartet have found themselves in Coral Gables.

"When I first started coaching, there were nice, solid Canadian players, but I mean, the athleticism is just ridiculous now," said Hurricanes head coach Katie Meier, who is in her 19th season at Miami. "There's a lot of talent and I didn't think that Miami would be a logical thing for a lot of Canadians. But as it turns out, we're doing really well."

Miami's Canadian foursome accounts for four of the 138 Canadian women's basketball student-athletes at the Division I level, a testament to the intrigue and opportunity to play at the Power Five level in such a unique city.

Among the group, junior guard Dwyer could be credited as the catalyst in starting the Canadian pipeline to the Watsco Center.

"My journey to Miami started when I got recruited to Miami as a junior in high school," Dwyer said. "I would say that I had a lot of offers, but Miami along with another school

kept going hard. Even throughout COVID they always checked up on me. Miami showed me that love, even though I could not actually visit the school. It was family and love ever since [Miami] started talking to me. That's the reason why I came here."

Dwyer made the major leap from her days in the AAU circuit with UPLAY Canada to stateside basketball at just 14 years of age. The shifty and tough point guard first landed in New Jersey before paving her way to The Webb School, a boarding school in Bell Buckle, Tenn., a far cry from the metropolitan streets of Toronto that she had been accustomed to.

"For me, I went straight to Jersey from Canada," Dwyer said.

"It was hard, I didn't know anyone. But then, the next year I had one of my friends, another Canadian, come to the same school as me. That helped me throughout my high school career to get a glimpse of having another Canadian with you."

Through her journeys in the states and amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hurricanes continued to keep tabs on Dwyer before she committed to Miami ahead of the 2021-22 season. Since then, she has become a regular at the point and helped the Canes to the 2022-23 Elite Eight as a leader.

From there, the connection to Ontario was built.

A year after Dwyer arrived, former AAU teammates Dwyer and Lattimore were reunited in Coral Gables after Lattimore, a 6-foot-4 ju-

nior, transferred from Texas ahead of the 2022-23 season.

"After my full year at Texas, honestly, I cut my list down to three schools," Lattimore said. "I kept looking and then I remembered that Lashae was on the team [at Miami]. I was thinking, 'I'm away from home and there is a Canadian on the team that I played with. So, I know I'll feel like I'm at home'...All the coaches reached out and showed love but [associate head coach Anthony Fitzroy] really felt like a father figure to me."

Two more Power Five transfers followed in Hylton and Day-Wilson, filling key roles after Miami's Elite Eight roster rolled over to include a number of new faces.

Hylton started her collegiate career out west, playing in 15 games at the University of Arizona, while Day-Wilson stayed in conference after an impressive two-year stint at Duke that saw her earn ACC Freshman of the Year laurels.

Day-Wilson and Hylton have made an immediate impact and quickly became two of Miami's top three scorers early in the season. Hylton produced 16 points off the bench in a road win at then-No. 21 Mississippi State, while Day-Wilson stole the show with a 19-point effort on 100 percent shooting against East Tennessee State.

"It wasn't a calculated move, it kind of just happened," Day-Wilson said regarding her decision to come to Miami. "I think at the time, Lemyah was about to make a decision and it just kind of all happened that we made a decision. Every single day it's one of those things where it just

feels like home. We 'know each other, know each other,' having probably grown up 10 or 15 minutes away from each other."

The Hurricanes built off their historic run from a year ago by opening the season with eight straight wins for the second time under Meier. In those wins, UM held teams below 50 points four different times, while pacing the ACC in bench points, scoring defense and three-point shooting percentage.

Each player has seen considerable time on a roster that features 10, six of whom are returning players, and four being transfers. Forty percent of those 10 Hurricanes arrived with

the pre-built Canadian chemistry, having grown up just minutes from one another before joining under the orange and green.

"When I entered the portal I had a lot of options, but I ended up narrowing it down to one school," Hylton said. "They ended up getting a commit and I did not know what I was going to do. All of sudden, Miami popped up and I felt like it was God telling me. I went on a visit, met with Coach Meier, the team and it felt like home. It helped being familiarized with some of the players already and knowing that we have a rooted system in Miami. Of course, it's way closer to home in Miami which was another factor."

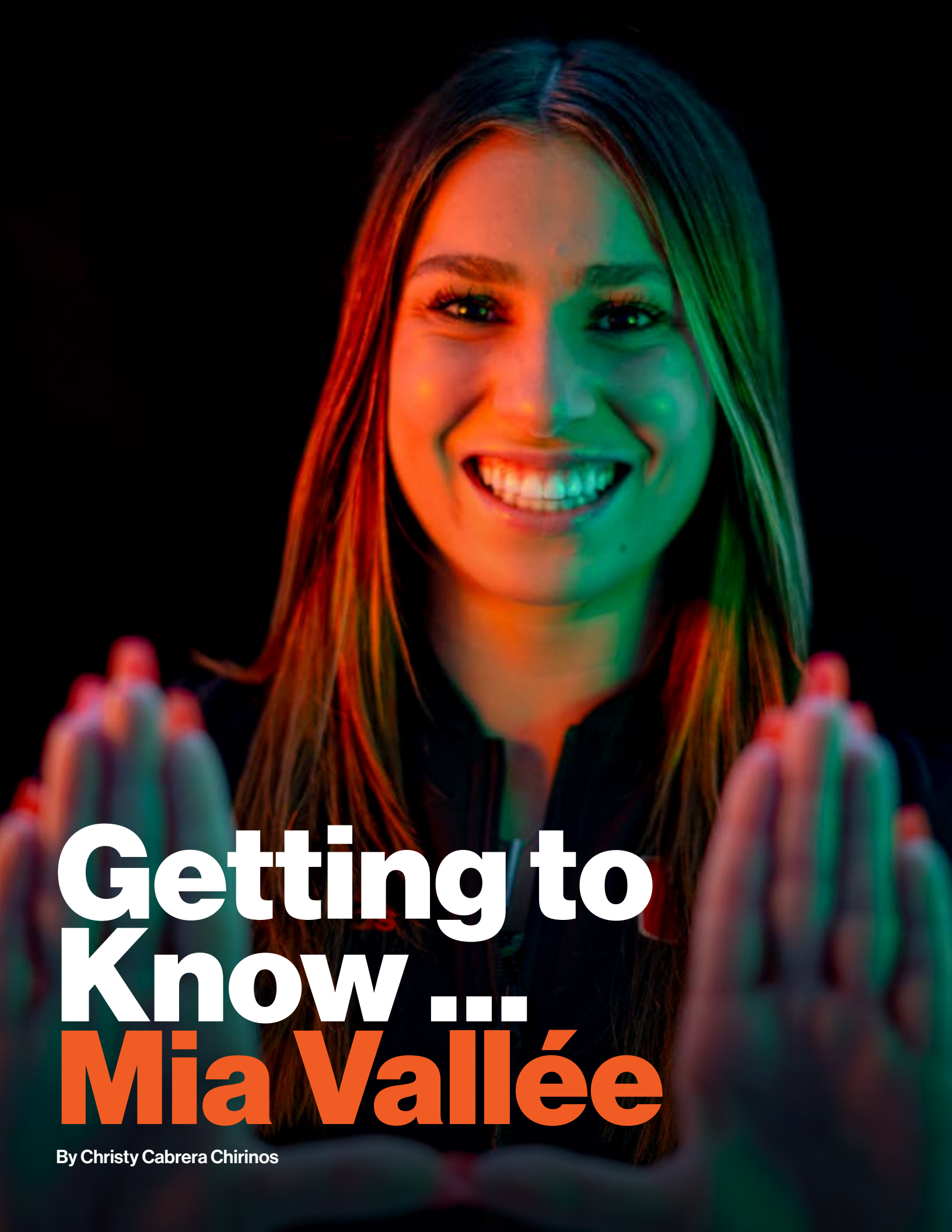
With the recruiting space in college basketball continuing to get more competitive and more international, it would be no surprise for Meier and the Hurricanes to continue to explore north of the 49th parallel.

"And I'm going to [keep recruiting] in Canada, you better believe it," Meier said.

Who wouldn't want to go from scraping ice from their car every morning to sunny skies and sandy beaches each day?

"Being with other Canadians, I love it," Lattimore said. "I cannot wait for the journey within the rest of the season."





Getting to Know ... Mia Vallée

By Christy Cabrera Chirinos

Mia Vallée wasn't quite sure what to expect when she visited Miami.

She knew the Hurricanes and their head coach, Randy Ableman, had a knack for developing championship-caliber divers, but even as she read all the names of those champions on the walls of Miami's facility, she could never imagine her name might one day be up there, too.

These days not only is Vallée – a native of Montreal – an NCAA and ACC champion, she's also emerged as one of Canada's top young divers and now has her sights set on competing in Paris at this summer's Olympic Games.

"When I came down to Miami, I didn't really have the Olympics anywhere near my goals. I just wanted to dive well and be a good college diver and maybe go back and see how I did in Canada, maybe go back for Nationals," said Vallée, who was named the ACC Women's Diver of the Year in 2022 after winning the NCAA title in the 1-meter springboard and that summer, earned both a bronze and silver medal at the FINA World Aquatics Championships. "Then I went back, and all this has happened. It's a little crazy. I don't know how to explain it, but it kind of feels like it's just another affirmation that I made the right choice in coming to Miami. I made the right choice to keep diving and that makes me feel really good about my future."

To help make her Olympic dreams come true, Vallée has – with Ableman and Miami's support – made the decision to redshirt this season, sitting out the NCAA schedule to focus on her training for the Paris Games.

She is one of three Hurricanes, along with teammates Emma Gullstrand of Sweden and Chiara Pellacani of Italy – that will miss this season to prepare for Olympics qualifying.

Hurricanes Magazine asked Vallée to take us through her decision to sit out this season, what it would mean to make it to Paris and how Miami has prepared her for her Olympic journey.

Here's what she had to say, in her own words.

Hurricanes Magazine: For those of who don't really understand the diving competition schedule or what it's like to prepare for an Olympics, why was it important to redshirt this season? What kind of a difference does it make?

Mia Vallée: "Well, I think it's different for everybody, exactly what they get out of a redshirt year. But for me, specifically, it had to do with how much energy I have just in general. I've had a couple really big years in the last two years, which is kind of when I was thrown onto the international stage a bit. I won NAAs and then all of a sudden, I went home for Nationals, and I won, which I didn't expect at all. ... I was thrown into competition after competition until I only had one week left until the NCAA season started. So, I really had zero break there and then the same thing kind of happened last year and I just have been hitting a wall. ... So, speaking to my coach last year, I was like, 'I don't think it's a very good idea for me to do this again. I'm too tired. There's too much traveling,' so we decided that it was in my best interest to maybe

not go to all the smaller dual meets. ... And [NCAA and conference championship] meets are huge meets for us. The competitions are very long. I think not doing those is going to give me a lot more energy and time of recovery in between my international competitions, which is going to be huge when it comes down to the Olympic trials and, hopefully, performing at the Olympics."

HM: What has it meant to you that Miami has allowed you, Emma, and Chiara to take this redshirt opportunity so each of you can focus on your Olympic goals?

MV: "I mean, that is just huge. It's one of the craziest things I think I've seen happen in my time here, especially considering I don't think it would be allowed to happen at almost any other program in the country. It says a lot for the respect that the University and athletic department has for our team and what we're doing. ... The fact that they're willing to allow us to chase an Olympic dream like this ... It means a lot to us that they believe in us like that. When I was looking at colleges, trying to figure out where to go, I remember that one of my main questions to the coaches was 'If I have an international competition or a national competition that is going to interfere when the NCAA season, what would you do?' And Randy was like 'Oh, we'll figure it out. That's not a question. You're going to be able to do your international competitions' and obviously, I've seen that's how he thinks and that's what my coaches believe. The fact that three of us are redshirting now shows that the rest of the University feels the same way and supports us, too. ... I'm really proud of this program and

being a part of it.”

HM: How much has it helped that you, Emma, and Chiara are going through this process together?

MV: “It’s honestly amazing. The two of them were in Tokyo for the Olympics, so being able to speak to them about the process and hearing what they have to say and what they’ve experienced is just a real help. When I don’t feel great about myself or I have a bad competition, they’re both like, ‘Hey, this has happened to us before. Don’t worry about it. It happens to everybody. We still went to the Olympics, we still did this...it’s not the end of the world.’ So, to have that backing of people around the same age as me to be able to talk about things is really great.”

HM: You’ve had the opportunity to represent Canada in several competitions already. How special is that, stepping up for a dive knowing you’re representing your country?

MV: “I mean, it’s kind of crazy. I don’t think I really realized the full extent of it until a few years ago when I stepped onto that stage after diving at Miami. ... When I stepped out at the World Championships two years ago, I was like ‘Wow, I’m one of the best in Canada and I’m out here representing my country and doing what I love.’ The whole country is behind you. I have that flag. I have the government support, my federation’s support, everyone’s support. It’s such an honor. It’s surreal to think about it.”

HM: How do you think competing at Miami has prepared you for moments like those, and for the journey you’re on now?

MV: “I do not think I would be where I am today or anywhere close to it without the University of Miami. I’m completely serious. I don’t even think I would be diving if it weren’t for Randy, [assistant diving coach] Dario [di Fazio] and my team. They really taught me to enjoy the sport again. I had given up on so many athletic dreams before I came down here and they really taught me how much I could do, how much I could love the sport and still work so hard. They taught me to find what motivates me and how to find internal motivation, instead of external motivation ... My team has made it so that I love coming to practice every single day and that’s just a really huge part of sport for me. ... And as if that wasn’t enough, the competitions in college really are a lot bigger than what I was used to in Canada. It’s about 50 girls [competing] instead of the like 15 we would have. That’s more similar to international competition and the Olympics or World Championships, so with that, when I did go to the international scene, it wasn’t a shock. I had been doing it for years [at Miami] and I was ready. ... I feel like I kind of was able to have those experiences that a lot of international divers don’t always get. ...

“And I think not only on the athletic side but being able to do my degree [in marine biology] and find passions that I have outside of diving ... the University gave me the chance to pursue that. That has mentally allowed me to take a step back from athletics at times, which allowed me to give it my all because it wasn’t always all or nothing. I wasn’t only working toward diving. I had multiple opportunities going for me, thanks to the University.”

HM: That national championship season, you’ve had some time to process that now and what it did for you. How would you describe the experience of winning that NCAA title?

MV: “I would say that kind of started the snowball of everything a little bit. I think it gave me the confidence to get where I am now because before that national championship, I hadn’t competed nationally in Canada or internationally for almost two years because of COVID and everything. So, it just kind of snowballed after that championship. I went back for Nationals. I qualified for my first World Championships. I won two medals there. ... Won Commonwealth Games. ... I had been focusing on the right things and doing what I needed to do, and I think that national championship really just proved it to me, without a doubt. That wasn’t something I could belittle in my brain, as athletes sometimes do with their success. That was something that I really had to be like, ‘Okay, you’ve made it. You’re there. You have what it takes, and you can do it.’ And that kind of allowed me to have that kind of concentration in all the rest of my competitions.”

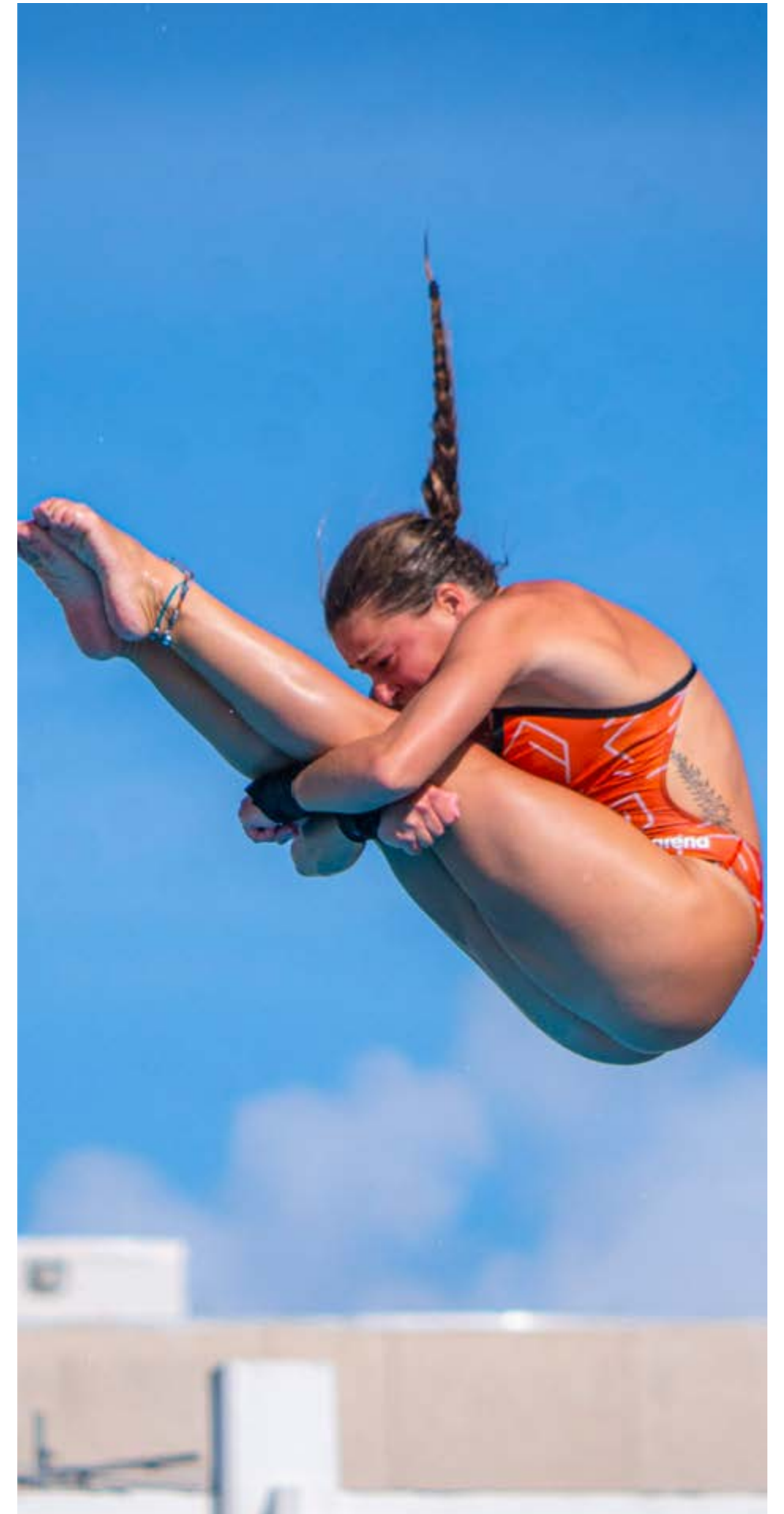
HM: Going back, even further than that, what was it ultimately that brought you to Miami and made you feel like this would be the right school for you?

MV: “So, first things first: I have to say, I stepped foot on campus and said, ‘This is where I’m going.’ I don’t know what it was in that moment, but I said, ‘This is where I’m going.’ ... When I came on my recruiting trip, I saw the wall with all the champions’

names and everything that Randy has done with his career here. I met Randy. I met Dario. I saw that they were just amazing people and when I spoke to the athletes and spoke to the team, they were just so welcoming and so inviting. ... It felt like home in just about every aspect and I think that’s what really made the decision for me. ... I can’t explain it, but it was just a feeling, and I couldn’t have made a better decision.”

HM: Looking back on it all to this point – your decision to dive, your decision to come to Miami and the opportunity now to train for the Olympics – is this anything you could have imagined growing up?

MV: “It’s not always easy. Practice is hard. But this is everything that little Mia dreamed of. I’m trying to go to the Olympics. I’m studying marine biology and getting my Master’s. I’m doing research. I’m living by the beach – that was another one of my big things when I was a kid – those three things were always so big for me, and I never thought they would actually happen. Each one feels like a dream, not something I could work toward and get. So, being here now is incredible. It’s mind-blowing when you think about it.”



Faces In The Crowd

By Christy Cabrera Chirinos



In each edition of *Hurricanes Magazine*, we'll spotlight some of the student-athletes who are rising above the competition in each of their respective sports and making a difference for Miami.

This installment of *Faces in the Crowd* features one of the ACC's top distance runners, a soccer player who had the honor of representing her home country's national team and some of the conference's top newcomers in both football and volleyball.

Get to know Hurricanes Melissa Dagenais, Mark Fletcher, Jr., Daphnee Lavassas, and Grace Lopez.



Melissa Dagenais, Graduate Student

Goalkeeper Melissa Dagenais put together another solid season in net for the Hurricanes, starting 15 matches and allowing just 20 goals while playing 1,252 minutes this fall. She posted a 1.44 goals against average and made 71 saves on the season. The Saint Hubert, Quebec native also recorded four shutouts this season, including a six-save performance against Louisville in September that marked her 12th shutout as a Miami Hurricane. She also had nine saves in a hard-fought 2-0 loss against eventual national champion Florida State. She finished her Hurricanes career with a total of 262 saves, which ranks third in program history and in October, was called up to represent her country as part of the Canadian National Team in a pair of friendlies against Brazil.



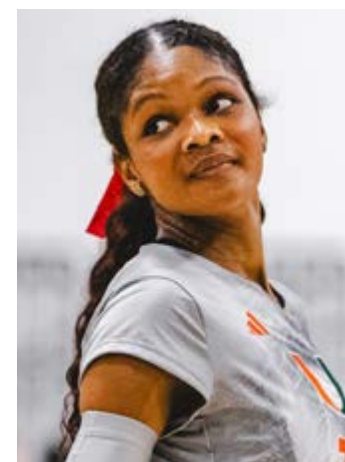
Mark Fletcher, Jr., Freshman

After a standout career at American Heritage in Plantation where he earned All-American recognition and helped the Patriots win a state championship, Mark Fletcher arrived at Miami with high expectations. And he wasted little time making a big impression. The running back dazzled during a preseason scrimmage at Hard Rock Stadium and then in September, scored in his first collegiate game, the Hurricanes' 38-3 season-opening win over Miami (OH). An injury sidelined him for three games, but once cleared to return to action, Fletcher again found ways to make big plays. He had the game-winning touchdown in the Hurricanes' 29-26 overtime win over Virginia and a week later, in his first start, rushed for more than 100 yards in Miami's loss to NC State. He was named the ACC's Rookie of the Week after that game and finished the regular season as the Hurricanes' second-leading rusher with 512 yards.



Daphnee Lavassas, Junior

After a strong outdoor track season in the spring, distance runner Daphnee Lavassas picked up right where she left off during the fall's cross-country season. The junior – who in her first season at Miami broke into the program's all-time top-10 in the 6K – became just the second Hurricane and the first since Melanie Schultz in 2005 to race at the NCAA Cross Country Championships. At nationals, she posted a time of 20:08.4, which placed her in the top 50 in a pool of 247 runners from across the country. In November, Lavassas broke the Miami program record in the women's 6K with her time of 19:56:10 at the NCAA South Regional. Earlier in the year, she placed 28th in a pool of 128 runners at the Alabama Crimson Classic with her time of 20:24.6.



Grace Lopez, Freshman

A former standout at Froebel Bilingual School in her native Puerto Rico, Grace Lopez wasn't sure what to expect after getting hurt during the college recruiting process. When Miami offered her a scholarship, the outside hitter jumped at the chance and quickly proved she was going to be an impact player for the Hurricanes. In her first season in Coral Gables, Lopez totaled a team-high 407 kills, a team-high 454 points and 27 service aces, second most on the team. She also notched 178 digs and 38 blocks. She earned first-team All-ACC honors in her debut season and was also named to the ACC All-Freshman team. The freshman has also already earned a spot in the Miami record book, her 30 kills in the Hurricanes' win over UNI in the NCAA Tournament ranking third in a single match. Eight times this past season, she notched more than 20 kills in a match.



Big First Impression: Rueben Bain, Jr.

By Christy Cabrera Chirinos

Lachande Thompson wasn't exactly surprised when her son called to tell her he'd brought home one of the Atlantic Coast Conference's biggest individual honors.

Proud? Yes. But surprised? Hardly.

She likes to joke that Rueben Bain Jr. has always been a bit ahead of his time and has, more often than not, found ways to make big first impressions.

After all, he made his dramatic entrance into the world three weeks early and didn't exactly wait for Thompson to make it to the hospital before he made his debut.

So, the fact her boy earned a starting job at Miami just three games into his collegiate career and was named the ACC Defensive Rookie of the Year two months later only seems, to her, more proof that Bain knows how to set the tone early – on the field and everywhere else.

"I joke with him a lot in saying that he has his own plans. He was due at

the end of September and decided to come on September 8th. ... And he could not wait for me to make it to the hospital. He was born in the ambulance," Thompson chuckled. "He's always been determined to pave his own road, if I must say."

These days, Bain is paving his own road at Miami, the program he's loved his entire life, the program where his cousin, former Hurricanes cornerback Tolbert Bain, once starred.

The freshman finished his first season in orange and green with 37 tackles, including 9.5 tackles for loss 7.5 sacks, numbers that ranked tops among all Miami defensive linemen. Bain also notched back-to-back games with multiple sacks in the Hurricanes' wins over Clemson and Virginia last fall and twice, earned recognition as the ACC's Rookie of the Week.

In December, he was ultimately recognized as the conference's top defensive newcomer and named to a plethora of Freshman

All-America Teams, including those put together by *The Athletic*, 247Sports, ESPN and others.

While all of that success and all those accolades may have caught the attention of some outside Coral Gables, Bain – and those who know him best – expected nothing less.

"I have super-high expectations, so I was trying to get any kind of awards or trophies that were possible, whether it was the Outland Trophy or the Heisman, something," Bain said. "Watching football growing up, I always thought sky's the limit. So, I never settle for less. I really don't care about age or being in this class or that class. I just wanted to come in and play football. My expectations were all at the top. ... Being Rookie of the Year means a lot. I had a friend that won it last year and it was something I was thinking about since I got to college."

“And I actually did it. It’s not like I made a goal and then didn’t put the work in. I put the work in, stayed dedicated to the work and the work paid off.”

Said Hurricanes head coach Mario Cristobal, “It means the world to him, that’s what it is. He is really talented and plays really, really hard and it means the world to him. [We] need a bunch more guys like Rueben Bain.”

While Bain is undoubtedly pleased with how his Hurricanes career has started, the freshman points out his work at Miami is nowhere near close to being finished.

Toward the end of last season, he began stepping up as one of the leaders in the locker room. Continuing to find his voice as one of those leaders remains a priority for him.

So, too, is setting an example for the South Florida community that embraced him first when he was a four-time state champion at Miami Central High School and has continued to support him now that he is suiting up for his hometown program.

And, Bain said, he hopes his journey at Miami inspires young football players across Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties, particularly when it comes time to decide where they’ll play college football, too.

“The history behind Miami, really ... everybody who’s come through here has tremendous passion for the school and for the city,” Bain said. “Just having the chance to have that impact that they had and



feel that love from the community, the school, the alumni, it’s just amazing. At the end of the day, I feel like I’m doing something the right way. And I know my mom is proud of it, my grandma, everything ...

“I embrace it like no other. Being here, it’s something that can’t be taken lightly, because if you know the history of the program, the people that have been come through here, it’s not something that’s just something to do. You can’t just half-way through it. You have to give it full effort. I just always look back on it and just recognize the position that I’m in and I don’t take anything for granted. I have family members that came through the process and have been where I’m at. They always told me how it was and what it can be. I want to see what it can be, so I put my best foot forward every day.”

And of course, he wants to continue growing his game on the field.

Being in Charlotte last December for the ACC’s postseason awards ceremony has only fueled him to get back there – as a competitor in the conference championship game.

He’s determined to continue to do the work needed on the field, in the weight room, and in the classroom to make that possible.

“I want to see my game grow to its potential max every day. I’m putting in the work on and off the field to be the best player and best person I can be,” Bain said of his goals for 2024. “I feel like with the culture, the staff, and the players I’m surrounded with, the sky’s the limit and the only thing that can stop me is me. ... Focusing on me and becoming the best player I can be and just dominating that aspect, then being more vocal, not just leading by action, but by word of mouth too, I feel like that’s something the team needs, the program needs. Once we get a few solidified leaders and captains, we’ll be okay.”

Bain has, through his first year as a Hurricane, already impressed teammates, coaches, and opponents. And every expectation is that he’ll just continue getting even better.

One person who believes in Bain’s ability to continue improving? His position coach – who just so happens to be a Pro Football Hall of Famer, a former NFL Defensive

Player of the Year, a Miami Dolphins legend and one of the most prolific defensive linemen in the history of the game.

“He came here for a reason. He wanted to put on for his city and play here and continue to make a legacy here. It’s important to him,” said Hurricanes defensive line coach Jason Taylor. “He embraces it. He spends time with everybody after practice. He’s always hanging out with family or friends or kids. He’s got that personality where he’s a big, soft, friendly kid – not in a negative way. He’s a big teddy bear, but he’s also a really good football player that is very violent, very physical, and very nasty on the field. But off the field, he does what he should do. He’s a perfect gentleman, he’s able to smile, shake hands, and kiss babies ...

“His name will be hanging up there, in the rafters with the rest of those greats and then who knows where he goes from there. Maybe one day, his name will be right next to mine at the stadium.”

Thompson, Bain’s biggest fan, also has no doubt there are more good things coming her son’s way.

“I hope there’s more awards to come and I know there will be because that’s just him,” Thompson said. “And I’m definitely waiting on his diploma because that’s a must for me. But I know he’s going to grow more in his craft and just become a bigger role model for his community. ... I just want Rueben to be the best Rueben that Rueben can be and for the world to see why I love him so much.”



A woman with long dark hair and glasses is smiling warmly. A young boy is holding up a pair of glasses, showing them to her. They are in a crowd of people, some wearing orange shirts, suggesting a community event or sports gathering.

Spreading Cheer

By Christy Cabrera Chirinos

For the Miami Hurricanes, making a difference in the community is a year-round priority.

But during the holidays, finding ways to spread cheer feels just that much more meaningful and as they so often have during the past, the Hurricanes dove right in.

Ahead of Thanksgiving, Miami's football team hosted its third annual Day of Giving with the Canes, an event that provides holiday meals to some very special families from the Miami-Dade County Foster and Adoptive Parent Association.

And in December, the Hurricanes Team Store and

Bryan Pata Foundation teamed up for the 23rd Annual Hurricanes Holiday Shopping Spree for Kids presented by Milam's Market.

Both events left both the Hurricanes – and the participants – smiling.

“This is a very special experience, you know? I love spending my time with kids. Love it,” said Miami linebacker Francisco Mauigoa at the Day of Giving event. “When kids smile, it just makes my day and days like today, you just forget about everything. So, I’m just glad to do this. I love this community and hope to do even more.”



Where Are They Now? Savanah Leaf

By Christy Cabrera Chirinos

She tries not to get too caught up in it all, but on those rare instances when Savanah Leaf lets herself think about the twists and turns her life has taken – and the milestones she’s hit along the way – she can’t help but wonder what might be next.

The former Hurricanes volleyball standout has had the honor of representing her country on one of sports’ biggest stages, the Olympics. She knows how it feels to be nominated for a Grammy Award. And last year, Leaf had the opportunity to show her debut film, *Earth Mama*, at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, the largest independent film festival in the United States.

Olympian. Grammy nominee. Award-winning filmmaker.

That’s not exactly a bad resume to put together before one’s 30th birthday, but that’s exactly what Leaf has done.

And the multi-faceted, multi-talented Miami alumna isn’t about to settle on any of her laurels.

“It feels like I’ve lived multiple lives,”

said Leaf, who was named the 2014 ACC Player of the Year during her time with the Hurricanes’ volleyball program. “When people ask me about being an athlete, it feels like a whole different lifetime ago. Even playing in the Olympics, when people ask me about that, I was 18 [years old]. I was so young and fresh-eyed. I don’t know if I fully grasped where I was. I don’t even have that many pictures of it, which is crazy. ... It feels like on the day-to-day, I’m just really living in the present. ... I’m happy with what I’ve been able to achieve and with the people I’ve been able to achieve it with, but I’m always thinking on what’s next. I don’t really dwell on everything for too long because it feels so distant to what’s next.”

Leaf may not know what twists or turns await on her journey, but there’s no doubt there’s already plenty been plenty for her to celebrate, including finding a calling that’s allowed her to thrive creatively, all while utilizing a good number of skills she acquired as an athlete.

The filmmaker, who was born in London but grew up in northern California where she discovered a knack for playing both basketball

and volleyball, has long worked to balance her love of sports with her creative side.

Leaf’s mother, Alison – an animator at Pixar Animation Studios – made it a point to nurture her daughter’s creativity, introducing her to different kinds of music, taking her to museums throughout California and making sure Leaf always had a paintbrush in her hands.

As Leaf grew older, though, finding a balance between her creative passions and her athletic endeavors became increasingly difficult.

When she enrolled at San Jose State as a freshman in 2011, she quickly realized her newfound responsibilities as a college volleyball player made it nearly impossible for her to pursue a degree in the school’s film department.

After a year at San Jose State, Leaf made the decision to transfer to Miami.

Before coming to Coral Gables, though, she was offered the opportunity of a lifetime: to suit up for Great Britain’s national women’s volleyball team and compete in the

2012 London Olympics.

It was an opportunity that still means the world to her.

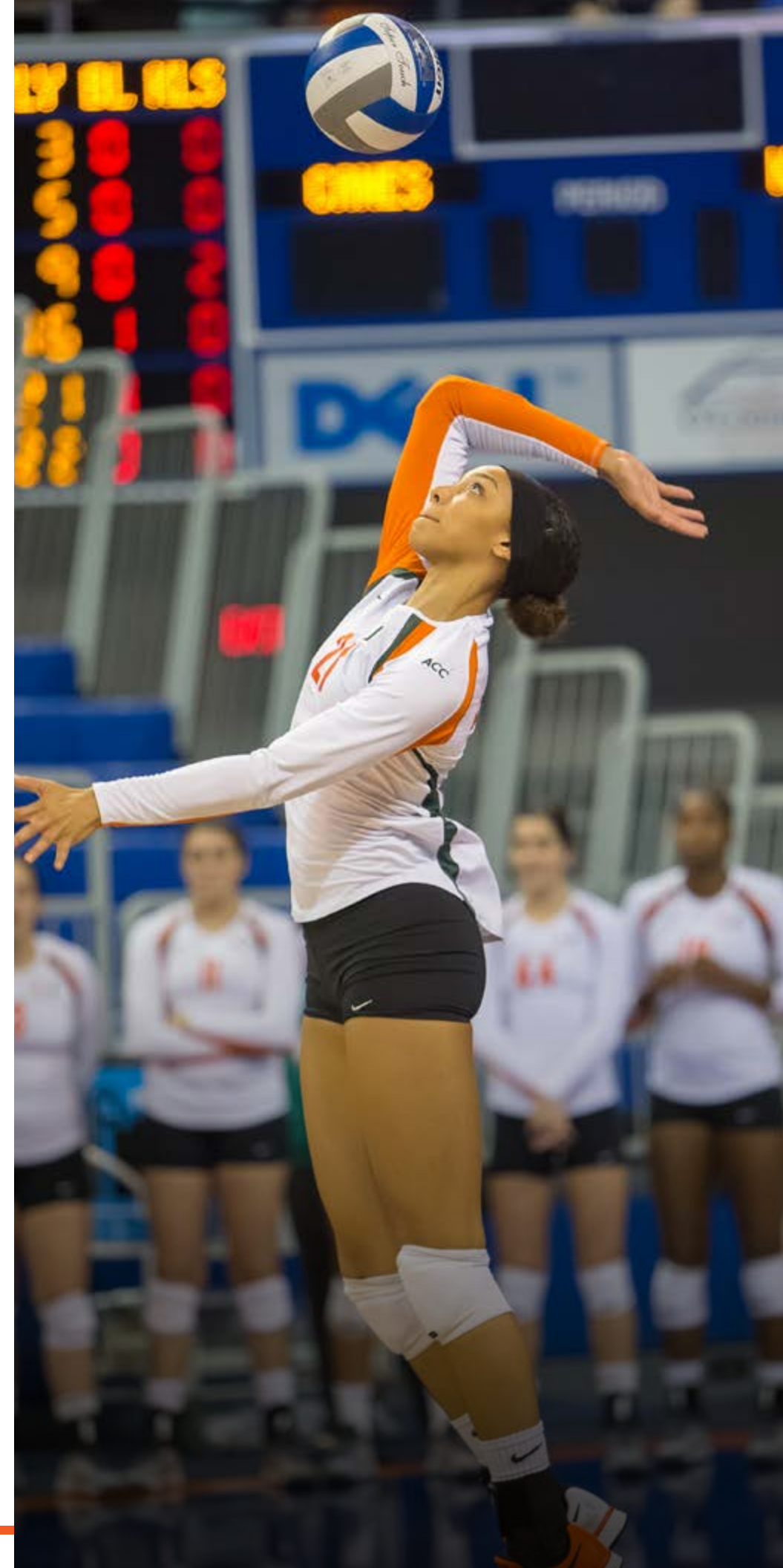
“That was a huge dream of mine, and it became a reality when I was 18 years old,” Leaf said. “Representing my home country, there’s nothing like it. In a way, I had kind of succeeded in that thing I wanted most from sports early on and it taught me a lot about your pursuit of your dreams, how to work in really tough environments, how to be challenged and speak up in really difficult situations and the pressure ... I learned how to cope with pressure.”

Great Britain didn’t medal in those Games, but Leaf brought that experience from London with her to Miami and quickly established herself as one of the top players in the ACC.

As a sophomore, the outside hitter recorded double-digit kills in 10 matches and finished the season second on the team with 22 service aces. A year later, she started all 31 matches and totaled 442 kills, a number good enough to rank seventh-most in program history in a single season. She earned a spot on both the 2013 All-ACC First Team and the 2013 All-ACC Academic Team.

Leaf only got better during her senior season.

She again started all 31 matches for the Hurricanes, but this time, totaled 502 kills, good enough for third best in a single season at Miami. She also finished the season as the ACC leader in kills-per-set with 4.65 and notched





13 double-doubles, including one in her final match in orange and green when she posted 20 kills and 10 digs in an NCAA Tournament loss to Florida.

Leaf was named the 2014 ACC Player of the Year, earned a spot on the All-ACC First Team, was named a second-team All-American by the American Volleyball Coaches Association and was a Senior CLASS Award finalist.

She graduated from Miami with a psychology degree and then opted to pursue a professional career, playing in both Puerto Rico and Turkey. She continued trying to connect with her creative side during that time, often taking photographs of her teammates or shooting video of their team activities.

Still, while she enjoyed the high-level competition she faced both at Miami and in the professional realm, there were challenges and Leaf acknowledges there were moments her mental health suffered.

“Honestly, it was one of the toughest times of my life from an emotional standpoint because I didn’t have all the kinds of outlets that I

have now, from a creative standpoint, but also from an emotional support standpoint,” Leaf said. “You’re in your teen years and your early 20s and I feel like during that time, you’re on this emotional roller coaster. ... You’re in one place, you’re trying to figure [it] out and there’s so much you can do in this life. You’re not limited and so in a way, it kind of built me up by really making it difficult for me.”

Things got even more difficult when, during her professional career, Leaf suffered a back injury that sidelined her for a year.

During that time, she reached out to different commercial and music video production companies in her native England and before long, found work as what she described as an “assistant’s assistant.”

That opened the door for her to reignite her creative drive and before long, she began working on her own projects.

“It was this huge journey for me, but I just knew I couldn’t go into what everybody else does, like a regular day job,” Leaf said. “That’s so not my personality. ... I was trying to figure out a way to break away

from this kind of day-to-day job and finding my own kind of voice in the world and my creative outlet and that’s kind of what this ended up being. I kind of forced it upon myself, which was terrifying. But I feel like it’s worked out.”

That might be an understatement.

Leaf dove into her new career with gusto, doing photography work and eventually, began directing various projects, including music videos for artists including Common, Jorja Smith, Swedish singer and songwriter Mabel, and Gary Clark, Jr.

She also tapped into her background as an athlete and collaborated on projects with the likes of adidas, Nike, and Fila, among others.

Her directorial work on the music video for Clark’s “This Land” earned her a Grammy nomination for Best Music Video in 2020 and helped set the stage for her work on *Earth Mama*, her feature-film directorial debut.

The film – which not only premiered at Sundance, but also won the San Francisco International Film Festival’s Audience Award for Best Narrative Feature in 2023 – centers on the life of Gia, a pregnant single mother in the Bay Area who has two children in the foster care system.

It was an incredibly personal project for Leaf, who has an adopted sister and grew up without her father’s presence in her life.

“The story is roughly based on my

relationship to my own sister and her birth mother,” Leaf said. “When I was 16 years old, my mom adopted my sister and she’s been a huge part of my life. That was part of it, and also, just me being a child ... I never knew my father growing up, so there’s this kind of yearning to understand a parent that’s not around and why they’re not around. Is it because they don’t love you? Or is it because there’s some huge decision they have to make? What’s that reasoning? I really wanted to explore that.”

While working on *Earth Mama* – and some of her directorial projects before that – Leaf couldn’t help but notice some of the similarities between filmmaking and competing as an athlete.

Her experiences at Miami, and beyond, she said, helped her navigate more than a few of the challenges she’s encountered on set.

“If you watched me as a player, I loved to kind of be in pressure situations. I loved being in a game. I loved the intuition you relied on, your way of finding creative plays in these weird scenarios that you’d find yourself in,” Leaf said. “That’s what it’s like being a filmmaker. You have all these stresses in this short amount of time, and you have to come up with these quick decisions. So, being an athlete versus being a filmmaker, there’s so many parallels.”

Her experience in Miami’s College of Arts and Sciences has also made a difference, she said.

“I think a lot of people, when they think about filmmakers, they think

you have to go to school for filmmaking, but I’m almost more grateful to have had a psychology degree because filmmaking is really about the study of human behavior and our social interactions, which is psychology,” Leaf said. “And filmmaking is also about working in a team environment, getting the best out of all these people and their different skill sets. ... I find art school can be kind of limiting in the idea of it, whereas psychology is really just about studying human behavior and social interactions. I really loved that and I still kind of think of it when I’m studying for a film. A lot of time, I’m doing research around human behavior and how people are interacting with one another. That becomes a lot of what writing a script is about.”

Leaf doesn’t shy away from acknowledging that even throughout all her success, there have been challenging moments.

But her experience as a student-athlete and her persistence have opened doors for her and changed her life.

And she’s confident the Hurricanes student-athletes navigating their own careers today in Coral Gables can have similar experiences.

“I think what you learn as an athlete can really be transferred into so much in this world,” Leaf said. “The most important thing, for me, is to not really give up and be persistent. I really feel like it’s so easy to just take the job someone gives you and just do it. But if you have an inkling to do something else, don’t be afraid of taking that chance and be persistent. That skill set you’ve

learned as an athlete, of getting better and better and more and more talented is a really incredible skill. Not everyone has it and not everyone has the ability to work as hard as you. Look at that and think of it as an asset ... Use that training and that willingness to be persistent and resilient in whatever you want to do. I know that sounds corny, but I really do believe we have a skill set that not everyone has, and we should really utilize it as much as possible.”



Photo courtesy of:
2AM Production & Management



Making an Impact: Rachelle Paul

By Christy Cabrera Chirinos

It was an incredible, magical stretch that still makes her smile.

As the former athletic director at Saint Peter's University, Rachelle Paul had a front-row seat for one of the most improbable NCAA Tournament runs in recent memory.

It began when the Peacocks, a 15-seed in the 2022 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, stunned second-seeded Kentucky in their tournament opener. It continued when the Peacocks notched another big win, this one over seventh-seeded Murray State and continued, yet again, when Saint Peter's then knocked off third-seeded Purdue in the Sweet 16.

In the span of two whirlwind weeks, the Peacocks made history as the first 15 seed to advance to the Elite Eight and became one of those magical Cinderella stories that captured the imaginations of college basketball fans across the country.

And through it all, Paul did her best to manage the excitement, both back on Saint Peter's campus in Jersey City, New Jersey and at tournament games in Indianapolis and later, Philadelphia.

"Two seasons later and I still have not fully absorbed all that was happening during the most incredible three weeks of my professional life thus far," Paul said in November from her new office in Coral Gables where she is one of the newest members of Miami's athletics leadership team. "Part of that is because everything happened so quickly. The other part of it is because we were such a small de-

partment at Saint Peter's. I could tell stories. ... My husband and I were in our hotel room from four o'clock in the morning until when I would get on the bus to go with the team to the arena, emailing tickets individually to people because we didn't have a dedicated ticket person, because, oh, by the way, we had just 40 season ticket holders at Saint Peter's that year. ... It was just very chaotic to say the least. ...

"But it's funny because while, yes, that run was magic and we shocked the world, for those of us that were in it and watched the program, and were involved with the program, we saw how [former Saint Peter's coach Shaheen] Holloway laid the groundwork, recruited the right student-athletes, built a culture, and lived the culture every single day. His assistant coaches and sports staff lived the culture. And the young men in the program bought in and lived the culture. So, it wasn't surprising to those of us that saw this happening."

These days, Paul is hoping to experience similar magic – and help make a similar difference – at Miami.

The veteran administrator joined the Hurricanes as their new Deputy Director of Athletics/Senior Woman Administrator last fall and has jumped into the work of getting to know her new home, her new colleagues and Miami's coaches and student-athletes.

It's been a bit of a whirlwind, she notes, but one she's enjoying, thanks in large part to the young people who wear orange and green, whether it be on the basketball court, the football field, the baseball diamond, the golf course,

on the track, in the pool, the tennis court or anywhere else.

"One thing about coming to Miami I was looking forward to the most was getting to know our student-athletes," Paul said. "That's why we do what we do. I've said for a very long time, I get up and come to work every single day for them. They're the ones whose experiences we are trying to make the best possible. Every day, we're making decisions that impact them. So, getting to know them, watching them compete, hearing what they're passionate about, why they compete, why they chose to come to Miami, that's what I've enjoyed the most."

For Paul, making the student-athlete experience as special as possible is personal.

The New York native was a two-sport standout at Canisius University in her hometown of Buffalo, where she earned letters in both lacrosse and soccer. After graduating in 2003 with a degree in communications, she stayed at Canisius to pursue a master's degree in sports administration.

It was then that she began to consider a career in college athletics, especially after connecting with a compliance staffer from the University of Buffalo who spoke during one of her classes.

"She described the type of person it took to do compliance – someone very detail-oriented, very organized – and I kind of thought to myself, 'Well, that sounds like something I would be interested in,'" Paul said.

“Everyone else in the class was like, ‘No, thank you. I’m not interested in compliance.’ She mentioned a fellowship at the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference office, and I was pretty intrigued.”

Paul pursued that fellowship opportunity – one that came, interestingly enough, in compliance – and began learning more about the career paths that existed in college athletics.

And, she quickly realized, many of the decision-makers she was meeting and working with were the ones who helped make her student-athlete experience at Canisius so memorable.

It was a realization that began to inspire her.

“I think it was very early on in that experience that I said to myself, ‘Wow. There are so many things that go on that as a student-athlete, I knew nothing about,’” Paul said. “And these folks that I have the tremendous opportunity of sitting in the room with right now are making the decisions that impacted my experience as a student-athlete or the current student-athletes’ experiences. I wanted to be able to be in the room where I could create positive change for the student-athletes and be a positive impact for them, similar to the way the administration was at Canisius when I was a student-athlete.”

She also realized, in looking around those offices and meetings at the MAAC, that a growing number of those decision-makers were women, women who were making a difference in college athletics.

That reality only made her new career path that much more intriguing.

Opportunities in the Northeast Conference, at Canisius and at Monmouth University followed that first fellowship before she was hired as the Senior Associate Athletics Director, SWA and Deputy Title IX coordinator at Seton Hall University in 2015.

During her time at Seton Hall, Paul managed all areas of student-athlete development and served as the chair of the BIG EAST SWA Committee.

Four years later after being hired at Seton Hall, Paul had the opportunity most young athletic administrators dream of: the chance to lead her own department.

She was named Saint Peter’s athletic director in 2019, but five months later, faced a challenge unlike any other.

“COVID negatively impacted an already-struggling enrollment environment and frankly, we had to be creative, and we had to think about how we were not going to let it negatively impact our student-athlete experience,” Paul said of the pandemic, which brought college athletics to a halt in the spring of 2020. “We had to really grind in fundraising and knowing our limitations, had to figure out ways where, if we couldn’t do it this way, let’s try to do it this [other] way.”

“I learned a tremendous amount at Saint Peter’s, and much of that I have brought with me here to Miami over the last few months that I’ve been here. I’m very proud of what we were able to do at Saint

Peter’s with very few resources. ... I would often use the men’s soccer coach there as an example all the time. He is a part-time coach but competed for conference championships regularly. And then certainly, with our men’s basketball run, going to the Elite Eight, the head coach there had a vision, believed in himself, and literally built it from the ground up. ... That said, I truly believe that under the right leadership, anything is possible, and I bring that with me here to Miami.”

At Saint Peter’s, not only did Paul revel in the Peacocks’ run to the Elite Eight, but she oversaw the renovation of the Yanitelli Center with the creation of “Run Baby Run Arena,” which opened during the 2021-22 academic year and is home to the Peacocks’ men’s and women’s basketball teams, as well as the volleyball team.

Under her leadership, Saint Peter’s also posted a 95 percent NCAA Graduation Success Rate following both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic years, which matched the school record.

She witnessed staff members’ growth and development in the athletic department, earning them new opportunities of their own. She watched as Saint Peter’s student-athletes excelled in competition and in the classroom.

It was an experience that proved beyond memorable, but when the opportunity to join the Hurricanes presented itself, Paul knew she had to consider a move to South Florida.

“It’s an exciting time in Miami athletics right now,” Paul said. “It’s an



exciting time for the University, obviously, with [football head coach Mario] Cristobal being new in his tenure here and the success that men’s and women’s basketball saw last year. It was just a really attractive time to be considered for Miami and that was really what went into my decision to ultimately say, ‘Yes, I want to be here.’”

Since joining the Hurricanes, Paul and her husband, Tim, have quickly embraced all that comes with living in South Florida.

They’re regular attendees at Hurricanes athletic events. When their schedules permit, they’ll drive north to visit family in Jupiter and Paul has quickly learned to appre-

ciate South Florida’s warm winter weather, going for jogs with her golden retriever when she can and occasionally, enjoying a round of golf.

A longtime college basketball fan, she’s excited to see how the Hurricanes men’s and women’s teams navigate their ACC schedules and build on the success they had a year ago.

More than that, though, Paul says she is hopeful her journey at Miami will not only make a positive impact on the staff and student-athletes she works with on a daily basis, but that she continues growing herself, both personally and professionally.

“I want to walk away from this office every single day and say, ‘I learned something new today. I was challenged today. I overcame something today,’” Paul said. “What we do is not easy. ... I’m not in the operating room or saving lives here, but I am impacting lives and, hopefully, impacting lives very positively. That’s what I want to be able to say. ... I want to be the best administrator I can be, and there are a number of folks here that I look forward to learning from every single day.”

“I think everybody in this building has something to teach me and I look forward to learning from every single person every single day.”



Embracing a New Role: J.D. Arteaga

By Christy Cabrera Chirinos

In the harried, busy summer months after he landed the job of his dreams, J.D. Arteaga found himself doing all the typical things a new head coach has to do.

He met with his players. Worked through the process of interviewing assistants and building his staff. He went through a series of media interviews, photo shoots and press conferences.

And once the school year began, he found himself back on the diamond with the Hurricanes as they went through their intrasquad, fall ball scrimmages. It was after those practices wrapped up, as he sat reflecting on the work his team had done, that Arteaga had a revelation.

“We have an exercise at the end of the fall where we hand out two questionnaires. One, you put your name on it and you just kind of have simple questions about the players to get to know their personal goals and some of their men-

tality,” Arteaga said. “And then there’s another one that’s anonymous where some of the questions are more about lineups and ranking hitters and pitchers, things like that.

“As I started looking at them, and thinking what our lineup is going to look like, it hit me, ‘Wow, soon, I’m going to have to do this hopefully 70-plus times during the season. I’m going to put a lineup together and it’s going to be challenging. It’s going to be challenging, but that’s a good thing, right? That means we have a lot of talent and there’s a lot of competition.”

For the better part of his 21 years as a part of Miami’s coaching staff, Arteaga’s primary focus was ensuring the Hurricanes’ pitchers were at their best on a day-to-day basis, on and off the field.

Now, as Miami’s new head coach, that focus has shifted. It’s his responsibility to make sure every player in the Hurricanes clubhouse is at their

best.

That’s going to be a change, of course, but it’s one the coach is happily embracing.

“Well, now the audience is a little bigger,” Arteaga quipped. “But ultimately, it’s the same concept. We’ve got to come together at the end of the day and be the best group possible. So really, on the field, it’s been the same way. Where normally, I used to just talk to pitchers and maybe a little to position players and hitters, now it’s talking to everybody and just giving my input about everything that’s going on the field.”

For Arteaga, baseball – particularly Hurricanes baseball – has long been a way of life.

He grew up playing the game under the guidance of his father, Juan Diego Arteaga, Sr. – a Cuban immigrant who loved the game and passed that love on to his son.

During Arteaga's childhood, he and his father spent many a Saturday driving around South Florida, picking Arteaga's teammates up at their respective homes and bringing them to the ballpark for practices and games.

When he wasn't playing ball himself, a young Arteaga often made his way to Mark Light Field to watch the Hurricanes play. And once he became a multi-sport standout at Miami's Westminster Christian, he began entertaining the idea of becoming a Hurricane himself, though he concedes that, like many teenagers, he briefly considered leaving his hometown for college.

Ultimately, though, he came to Miami as a walk-on first baseman – with an ACL he'd torn his senior year of high school.

Arteaga worried that with his injury he wouldn't be able to stay on the roster. So, he told his coaches that in high school, he'd also pitched, and he was confident he could do it at the college level, too.

He knew that would allow him to get on the field, without having to run much.

"I never swung the bat again," he said simply. "That was it."

The first baseman-turned-pitcher went on to become one of the most successful hurlers in Miami history.

Arteaga played for the Hurricanes from 1994-1997, helped Miami make four straight College World Series appearances and his name still features prominently in the Hurricanes' record book. He remains the winningest pitch-

er in Miami history with 43 victories. His 72 starts are still a Miami record. And he ranks second in innings pitched (458.1) and fifth in strikeouts (343).

After college, Arteaga was drafted by the New York Mets. He went on to spend six seasons in the Mets' and Houston Astros' organizations before joining the Texas Rangers in 2003.

But through all his time in professional baseball, Arteaga stayed connected to the Hurricanes.

He often trained and threw bullpen sessions at The Light and spent time with the current Hurricanes players and coaches who now called the park home.

One of the people he spoke with most? His former Miami coach, Jim Morris, who before Arteaga packed up to head to spring training with the Rangers that fateful spring, asked the pitcher about his future.

"He's been around a long time and he kind of starts to see the writing on the wall," Arteaga said of that conversation. "I was 26 years old, in the minor leagues and he asked me, 'What do you want to do if baseball doesn't work out?' And I said, 'Well, if it doesn't work out as a player, I want to coach in college' and he said to me that if I decided to do that, to let him know.

"So, I said, 'Well, I will. But there's one thing – I'm not leaving the city of Miami.'"

The two exchanged a few laughs about how that limited Arteaga's options and the pitcher left South Florida for spring training in Arizona.

Two weeks later Arteaga caught a breaking news update on television.

Miami had fired its pitching coach and Arteaga had a feeling his life was about to change.

"I knew [Morris] was going to call me. They had played a series that Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I'm in Arizona, we get done with our workout, and around noon, I got in my car, and sure enough, I had a missed call from Coach Morris," Arteaga recalled. "But before I called him back, I called my wife and said, 'You know, Coach just called. He's going to offer me the job' and she said whatever you want to do, know I support you."

Arteaga was right. When he called Morris back, a job offer as Miami's new pitching coach awaited.

He joined the Hurricanes seven games into their season and in his first game as a coach – on the road against a ranked Tennessee team – Arteaga realized just how much Morris trusted him.

"I can't remember the exact situation, but it was in Friday's opening game, and we were basically jammed up or something," Morris said. "He looks over at me and goes, 'What do you think?' and right in the middle of the game, I said, 'I think you're the pitching coach' and I turned away."

Said Arteaga, "That's when it kind of hit home, like 'yeah, it's my decision.' ... At the time, I thought, 'He really trusts me.' ... That really built my confidence."

That trust Morris had in his former pitcher would only grow over the course of the next two decades.

And it is one of the reasons why Morris is confident Arteaga will now thrive in his new role as the leader of the Hurricanes' program.

"He's a great person and pretty easy going, but when the lights are on, he's a special competitor," Morris said. "We're going to see a different J.D. when they turn the lights on. ... He's done everything it takes to win as a player and that's a great thing when you can compete at the level he's competed at. He figured out how to get [opponents] out and I think he can carry that over as a coach and be able to figure out how to beat people on the other side of the field and in that other dugout. And I'm sure he can't wait."

Morris still knows his former pitcher well. Arteaga is indeed counting down the days until Miami's Feb. 16 opener against the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

Making the experience of preparing to coach his first season at his alma mater even more special is that fact that his daughter, Ariana, started her freshman year at Miami in January. And every expectation is that father and daughter will be able to share their new journey as Hurricanes together.

But the Arteaga family knows there will be bittersweet moments, too.

Arteaga Sr., the man who taught Arteaga to love the game, passed away when his son was in high school and never saw Arteaga pitch at Miami or become a coach.

And in 2018, Arteaga's son, Ari – who grew up at The Light with his father – was killed in a single-car accident that left the coach, his family, and the Hurricanes devastated.

That neither Arteaga Sr. or Ari Arteaga will be at The Light this season hurts, but the Arteagas believe Ari's spirit will be with his father on Opening Day and beyond.

And Arteaga Sr.'s coaching influence has stayed with his son since those early practices at Tamiami Park and the Boys and Girls Club.

"We know that Ari is behind everything that happens in our family," said Ysha Arteaga, the coach's wife. "We don't have him with us, but we're a family of faith. ... Every time I pray, I'm like, 'God, please let our son be this force of blessings for us and guide us through anything we do.' ... So, yes, it will be bittersweet, but we know that Ari was with us every step of the way, helping our family. ... He's with us."

Said Arteaga, "My dad was an advocate of really just helping kids and families that needed it. It didn't matter what sport it was, and it didn't matter who they were or where they lived. If we had a 9 a.m. practice on Saturday, we'd leave our house around 6 because we had to drive all the way up to Hialeah and then over to [Miami] Beach to pick kids up and get those kids to practice. ... I'd like to think I'm a giving person like that. If someone's in need, I'm there. That's what I've always thought, what I always try to teach my kids. Just be a good person. ... That's the greatest lesson I learned from my dad; be the best person you can be."

That approach, that mentality, is one Arteaga intends to carry with him as he takes over as Miami's head coach.

More than anyone, he understands the expectations that come with

coaching in Coral Gables. He knows the goal is to get to Omaha and the College World Series every season.

And that's what he wants to see the Hurricanes do."

He also wants to see his players become the best versions of themselves off the field, too.

"I want them to know there's so many ups and downs in life, right? Getting them to understand that life's a roller coaster, you have your ups and downs," Arteaga said. "When you're heading in a downward spiral, it's about leveling off first and then getting back up. And when you're riding high, understand you stay there as long as you can, but there's going to be a dip in the road coming and you need to be ready to handle it all. ... Those dips are what make the success that much sweeter."

Said Ysha Arteaga, "When he played his four years at UM, they had great chemistry, great team bonding and team unity. And he wants his team now to experience that, to experience what he experienced as a player. ... His goal has always been Omaha. As a player, he went all four years. ... That's how you finish the season. You end up in Omaha and he wants to make that a reality again, that we go every year. ... Keeping his team together, inspiring them, motivating them, and making them the best that he can possibly make them and bringing out their best, that's his goal."

Canes Chronicles: Back to The Light

By Rick Remmert

For more than a half-century, University of Miami baseball has brought great acclaim to the institution and enthralled millions.

The Hurricanes have qualified for the NCAA Tournament 49 times and made 25 College World Series appearances, winning four national championships in 1982, 1985, 1999, 2001.

Alex Rodriguez Park at Mark Light Field, home of the Hurricanes, is much more than the little ballpark on the corner of Ponce de Leon Boulevard and San Amaro Drive. It's the place where families gather to enjoy the national pastime and make memories that are passed from generation to generation.

The Light is home to baseball that is annually among the nation's finest and is an entertainment experience rivaled by few in South Florida. The Mark Light Milkshakes are also worth the trip all by themselves.

Miami baseball was first put on the map by The Wizard of College Baseball, former Hurricanes coach Ron Fraser. His Hurricanes won titles in 1982 and 1985, and

for 30 years featured outstanding teams and the good, clean, family entertainment that The Wizard parlayed into packed ballparks night after night.

Former Miami head coach Jim Morris extended and enhanced the Mark Light Magic for 25 seasons beginning in 1994. His Hurricanes excelled on the field, winning national championships in 1999 and 2001, and maintained Miami baseball as a superior entertainment choice.

Following Morris, standout UM baseball alum Gino DiMare led the team to an NCAA Tournament berth in four of his five seasons, excepting the pandemic-shortened 2020 year.

Now Hurricanes baseball enters the Arteaga Era as UM's all-time winningest pitcher, J.D. Arteaga, takes the reins of one of college baseball's premier programs.

The action will be back before you know it: Fan Fest will be held on February 3; the Alumni Game and Former Player Intros will be on February 10; and the season opens with a four-game

series against NJIT on February 16-17-18.

This 2024 season will mark the 25-year anniversary of Morris' first national championship team. The 1999 champs will be honored at their reunion game on February 17.

Stadium public address announcer Jay Rokeach, often imitated but never duplicated, returns for a 56th season behind the microphone. Jayro's voice is the soundtrack to Hurricanes baseball.

The Sugarcane, college baseball's first batgirls, and The Miami Maniac, college's first baseball mascot, were both born from the genius of Fraser's imagination and have been fan favorites more than 40 years.

Professional Concessions, Inc. returns for its 40th season and offers popular ballpark food plus beer and wine, and, of course, fans can satisfy their cravings with their favorite Mark Light Milkshake.



Arteaga heads up an outstanding coaching staff. As one of the preeminent hurlers to take the Mark Light mound, he set school records for career starts (72) and victories (43).

His uniform number 33 was retired, and Arteaga ended his promising pro career in 2003 when Morris offered him the job as the program's pitching coach, a position Arteaga excelled at for 21 seasons. More than 50 of his pitchers went on to play or continue to play professional baseball.

Laz Gutierrez returns to The U as pitching and mental skills coach. A three-year UM letterwinner in the 1990s, Gutierrez was a member of the Boston Red Sox organization for 13 seasons. His leadership and mental skills routines helped the Red Sox win World Series Championships in 2007, 2013, and 2018.

Assistant Coach Darren Fenster joined the Hurricanes following 12 seasons also in the Red Sox organization. Fenster helped prepare the next crop of major league stars that included contributors to Boston's World Series Championships in 2013 and 2018.

The 2024 season will be Jonathan Anderson's fifth at UM as Assistant Coach/Recruiting Coordinator, overseeing video, baseball analytics, and recruiting.

Director of Program Development Rob Cooper was a 1993 letterwinner at Miami. Cooper served nine seasons as head coach at Wright State and 10 years as head coach at Penn State.

Brandon Brewer enters his second season with the Hurricanes as Director of Player Development,

serving as infield coach and will also assist with Miami's hitters.

And best-in-the-business Director of Baseball Operations and Camps, Robert "GM" McDaniel, starts his 23rd campaign in Coral Gables.

This 2024 season marks the 50-year anniversary of Miami baseball first crashing the party as a college baseball power. The 1974 Hurricanes finished second at the College World Series.

First with Fraser and Morris, and now under J.D. Arteaga's leadership, Hurricanes baseball looks to continue as a national baseball power and a popular destination for its loyal and passionate fans.

Season tickets are available for families and individuals, offering reserved or general admission seating. Call 1-800-GO CANES or visit miamihurricanes.com/tickets.



Susan and Stephen Symons Training Center Dedicated

By Christy Cabrera Chirinos

Before Miami's men's basketball team took the floor at the Watsco Center in November for a home game against UCF, the Hurricanes had the opportunity to celebrate program history, raising their banner from last year's run to the Final Four.

They also had the chance to celebrate something else: the dedication of the Susan and Stephen Symons Training Center, which will give both the Hurricanes men's and women's basketball teams a new state-of-the-art space that will help them push for more history on the hardwood.



The new facility covers more than 7,500 square feet and features the Jimmy and Kim Klotz strength and conditioning room, a recovery area, a nutrition bar and office space for support and medical staff. It nearly triples the size of Miami's previous basketball training facility.

"Our mission is to build championship programs here at Miami and a major part of that mission is ensuring our student-athletes have

the very best facilities to compete at the highest level in the sports they love," Vice President/Director of Athletics Dan Radakovich said. "Supporters like the Symons and Klotz families understand that vision and their leadership financial commitments have helped us create one of the premier basketball training facilities in college athletics."

Susan and Stephen Symons

joined Radakovich, men's basketball coach Jim Larrañaga, women's basketball coach Katie Meier and several Athletic Director's Society members in Coral Gables for the facility's dedication.

Editor's note: Prior to the publication of Hurricanes Magazine, Stephen Symons passed away on December 30 at the age of 80. We are forever grateful for his contributions to Miami Athletics.



Student-Athlete Development Spotlight: Learning to Lead

By Christy Cabrera Chirinos

Most of their teammates were already done for the day.

Their classes were behind them. So, too, were the workouts and practices for their respective sports. Still, on this particular Tuesday night in November, a handful of Hurricanes returned to the Hecht Athletic Center to go over job-hunting and networking tips with members of the career education team from the University's Toppel Career Center.

The career-planning event was part of the fall-semester programming for HER, the Honor.Empower. Rise Women's Leadership Academy which was founded in 2022 to help UM's women student-athletes develop their leadership skills and build connections not just with their fellow student-athletes, but members of the South Florida community at large.

At the event, HER participants had the chance to go over the results of a career assessment quiz that matched them with potential job opportunities. They learned about the services available to them at Toppel. And, just as importantly, they had the chance to spend some time with fellow student-athletes, who, like them, are navigating all the challenges that come with trying to balance the responsibilities of competing at a high level, while working toward a degree and thinking about life after sport.

It was an experience none of them took for granted.

"It makes me feel cared for as a student and an athlete and a person," said graduate student Christina Warren, a member of the Hurricanes' track and field team of the



opportunity to be part of HER. “This is a personal development thing, so I like the holistic interest Miami has in us. It’s not just ‘You’re here to get points and win and maybe graduate.’ ... I’m sure there are some schools out there who put maybe less of an emphasis on developing the student-athletes on a personal level like this. ... but this gives you a very one-on-one, personalized experience ... It doesn’t feel like a class. ... It’s cool.”

HER is one of two leadership academies offered to Miami student-athletes through the Office of Student Athlete Development. The other, the Hurricane Leadership Academy, is a co-ed program designed to help some of the newest Hurricanes – be they freshmen, sophomores, or transfers – develop the budding leadership skills their coaches have seen in them during their first weeks or months on campus.

“The general purpose is really to enhance the leadership qualities that student-athletes already have, but also the things that employers

look for in student-athletes,” said Assistant Athletic Director for Student-Athlete Development LaToya Farris. “We want to be able to help them become more aware of what skills and qualities they possess and for some, it’s a lot about giving them the confidence and showing them that they can be a leader wherever they are.

“You don’t have to be a team captain, you don’t have to be the president of the [Student Athlete Advisory Committee], you don’t have to be what they look at as the head of something to be a leader. In both programs, that’s one of the main focuses, to develop their leadership skills and allow them to understand how they can use those skills in whatever aspects of their life that make the most sense.”

Members of the Hurricane Leadership Academy are selected to join the program by their coaches, while HER participants go through an application process, with some having already gone through the Hurricane Leadership Academy earlier in their Miami careers.

While the programs may be different, the goal is the same: to help Hurricanes student-athletes be at their best, on and off the field.

And the lessons learned in the leadership academies, participants said, make a difference.

“Probably [how to have] crucial conversations,” said Hurricanes wide receiver Michael Redding III of the most impactful skill he acquired during his time in the Hurricane Leadership Academy. “Sometimes, we have to hold people accountable, but we have to learn how to hold those people accountable through the conversations we have with them. We have to be able to have constructive conversations and be able to connect with another person and be able to set boundaries or be able to talk to somebody with respect. You can be passionate about something, but being able to have self-control and be able to get what you need done within a conversation is awesome. I think that was the best thing [I learned].”

The opportunity to get to know fellow student-athletes from other sports, participants said, was a difference-maker, too.

More than once, Farris has watched as leadership academy participants have bounced ideas off each other and shared how their respective teams have dealt with certain challenges.

Those brainstorming sessions, she said, have proven invaluable.

“A lot of times, they get to pose a situation to the group and then ask for their feedback, so they find out this is how the baseball team would handle a particular situation or this is how swim and dive, what they do when something similar has arisen,” Farris said. “That is one of the things that is really cool to see, just them leaning on each other in that space.”

Added soccer midfielder Julia Edwards, who has been part of both the Hurricane Leadership Academy and is now participating in HER, “I feel like sometimes, when we’re inside athletics, it’s a lot of just focusing on our specific sport. So having an opportunity, in athletics, to connect with other players, other athletes and see the differences between their sport and mine, how their team chemistry and dynamics [work] is really interesting. ... It’s really been a great opportunity. Being in both [HER and Hurricane Leadership Academy], I feel like I’ve learned a lot about leadership skills and different techniques to approach not only life, but also my team in terms of being a good teammate, being a good leader and being a good person in the community.”



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