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COVER STORY LACROSSE SPORTS



📷 The Oregon Men's Club Lacrosse team holds practice at the turf fields outside of The Rec on the University of Oregon campus in Eugene, Ore. on Tuesday, April 11, 2017. (Adam Eberhardt/Emerald)

The business of lacrosse: Coaching and marketing UO Lax

Kylee O'Connor — April 13, 2017 at 6:00 am

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The University of Oregon club men's lacrosse team has continually found ways to stand above the 41 other club teams at UO. Not only is it one of the top club teams in the country, but it practices at the Moshofsky Center, Oregon football's indoor athletic facility; has three social media and multimedia interns; boasts a strong alumni base and fan following; and even garnered an apparel deal with Nike.

Head coach Markus McCaine has played an integral role in making this happen. He always admired Oregon lacrosse, which was a powerhouse program when he was an undergraduate playing for the University at Buffalo in New York. He won a national championship with Colorado and was the head coached at Alabama before coming to Oregon.

Now a master's student in Oregon's renowned Warsaw Sports Marketing program, McCaine is translating his marketing skills into big perks for his team.

"The ultimate goal is to build something, in terms of club, that is kind of above being a club and one step behind being varsity," McCaine said.

The team does not get all of the same benefits as Division I athletes at Oregon, but the agreement McCaine negotiated with Nike includes \$5,000 of gear, 40 percent off retail pricing for apparel purchases and 35 percent off retail pricing for footwear purchases. The team also receives buy-two-get-one-free custom Vapor Elite gloves and buy-three-get-one-free on other athletic accessories like padding and backpacks. The team's only responsibility is to be a "brand ambassador" by promoting the Nike brand on social media and wearing 100 percent Nike uniforms.

"I don't think Uncle Phil could have a contract with anyone else at this level," senior captain Justin Knowles said. "It's a way to legitimize our program."

McCaine has also negotiated informal sponsorships for the team with GoPro and Muscle Milk. Part of the reason these agreements came to fruition was the team's impressive social media following. The team has nearly 12,000 Instagram followers, almost 3,000 followers on Twitter and over 2,000 likes on Facebook. One of the team's video:  Instagram reached over 52,000 views.



Oregon Head Coach Markus McCaine speaks to the team during practice. The Oregon Men's Club Lacrosse team holds practice at the turf fields outside of The Rec on the University of Oregon campus in Eugene, Ore. on Tuesday, April 11, 2017. (Adam Eberhardt/Emerald)

Three volunteer interns the club hires each year are in charge of producing written content, taking video, photos and running all of the social media platforms. McCaine started recruiting these interns to build the program's brand when he first joined the program in fall 2015.

"Markus came in with a fresh mindset," Dustin Valdez, one of the interns, said. "Obviously being a business student, knowing that there's more out there, knowing that lacrosse is a rising sport and people want a piece of that. Especially with Nike being right up the road. They do have a lacrosse line, but it's kind of untapped — it hasn't gotten big."

McCaine even created a "brand guide" including what hashtags the interns should use, how the posts should look and the quality of photography that should be posted.

"We built out that brand, what it would look like, what it would sound like and what it would be," McCaine said. "Then we just translated that into social media and that's when it just blew up. Once we got some interns, we were really consistent with who we were and what we're about, and it took off."

Junior long stick midfielder Troy Romstad sees the opportunity McCaine has to coach an elite club team and develop his sports marketing skills at the same time as a "win-win."

"He's building his sports marketing resume by doing all of this stuff for the lacrosse program, but for guys like me who are just on the team, I get so much new, cool stuff that we didn't get before," Romstad said.

Apart from the product deals, the lacrosse team has found a way to utilize some of Oregon's top facilities and trainers through a class called sports conditioning, which club athletes can take after completing the weightlifting prerequisites. The athletes are able to work out with strength and conditioning coach Mark Davis, who also works with varsity women's basketball and volleyball. Every Tuesday and Thursday, the athletes are put through an hour and a half workout in the Moshofsky and Casanova Centers.

"We've developed a strong relationship with Coach Davis and it's honestly the most fun I have as an athlete," Knowles said. "You get amazing facilities, you have a coach who knows what he's doing and that's a lot of fun. It's a really healthy environment to get stronger and get better as an athlete."

McCaine has created a program that is as close to Division I as it gets. But because of Title IX regulations, if Oregon created a varsity men's lacrosse program, the school would either have to get rid of one, or even two, men's teams or add a women's athletic team to make up for the extra 50 varsity male athletes.

Title IX mandates that UO offer an equal opportunity for men and women to participate in NCAA athletics.

"We kind of float in the space between a club sport and a Division I sport," Valdez said. "The only thing that is holding us back from being a Division I sport is funding and Title IX."

Despite creating a distinguished club lacrosse program, McCaine says that there is still much to be done. He wants to up the men's athletic apparel even further, wants to have "more alignment" with the women's club lacrosse program and even hopes to play on Pape Field someday. For now, he continues to "run as close to an NCAA program" as he can.



Oregon Head Coach Markus McCaine watches as players participate in a drill. The

The University of Oregon Lacrosse Team

