Lee College fights perception as Region XIV play begins

It’s full steam ahead for Lee College athletes as it pertains to getting back on the court for the fall of 2021. Both the basketball and volleyball team are in the midst of preparing to get respective rosters together following the shut down of athletics for the 2020-21 season due to the COVID-19 pandemic as the majority of other Region XIV teams begin competition.

“All the coaches are out there actively recruiting for the upcoming season and nothing has changed from our original statement that we were suspending athletics for one year due to the pandemic,” Lee College athletic director Graeme Cox said. “Some of the coaches are saying they are hearing some weird things out there that really disappoints me that other people are talking smack and don’t even know what’s going on.

“Maybe that’s the world we live in now. I don’t understand why people would think that when we haven’t made an announcement and the coaches would not be recruiting and we wouldn’t be paying them to recruit a team if we weren’t going to have a team.”

Cox said the main issue is the rhetoric floating around that Lee College had or was planning to cut their athletic programs.

Roy Champagne, the men’s basketball coach, confirmed at least one recruit has hesitated on signing with the school until he knows for sure if the team will play in the fall.

“Right now, it’s not shaping up good at all,” Champagne said. “We are actively recruiting, and there are kids interested in coming, but they are leery if there is a season, a team, or a program next year. That’s coming from them. Once perception becomes reality to them …

“Yes, we are actively recruiting and we actively recruited last year and we didn’t have a team and the season is being played. That’s the issue. Why go to Lee when you can go to 12 other schools in Region XIV that are playing?”

Champagne doesn’t know for sure where that stimulus is being created, but it could come from a lack of information put out since June from the college or his competitors could be disseminating such information as well.

“We have only put out one statement,” Champagne said. “I have been recruiting long enough and I know what tools (coaches) use and how they go about it.”

Champagne confirmed he has offered out a scholarship that is yet to be signed basically due to a wait-and-see approach.

Cox said the pandemic can still potentially change plans, saying, “you don’t know what’s going to happen, but we are moving forward and are optimistic that the vaccine is going to work and enough people will take the vaccine and the community is protected. We are just charging forward.”

Cox said the school is moving forward in its housing plans for athletes and upgrades being made to make sure that is a go.

“We are doing everything we can,” Cox said.

Essix has also been working the recruiting trail and said she has signed one player for next season, adding Texas City middle blocker Ashlynn Lewis, to the roster which still includes Barbers Hill alum Kylee Kejonen who remained at the school.

“I am doing my best to build the spots that I need to replace the players who transferred,” Essix said. “I would agree with Roy. It’s kind of like the players are holding out committing to see if they get another offer. Division I’s are not really recruiting right now.

“Junior colleges should get a lot of good players this year, but players are holding out to see if they get a Division I offer and that’s where I see some of the hesitation on my end.

The NCAA is currently playing the second half of its campaign, backlogging many recruiting efforts.

“I am going off of what the administration told me,” Essix said. “They are saying they are planning to have a season and allowing us to recruit and to sign players. But it’s pretty fair for the players to feel that way as well because they want to play.”

Champagne has been teaching more classes and trying to recruit as much as he can. He also confirmed he is mulling the possibility of retirement.

“I am eligible to retire as of May,” Champagne said. “I’ll be 52 years old this year, but I can coach until I am 75.”