

“Student Affairs Talk” • Rachel Jones, Campus Recreation • November 15, 2021

Q: Thank you for joining us this week, Rachel. You serve as assistant director of Campus Recreation, focusing on club sports --- tell us what all that entails?

JONES: Yes, you’re correct, I serve as the assistant director for Club Sports with Clemson Campus Recreation. Primarily, I oversee the day-to-day operations of our Club Sports program that serves roughly 3,000 unique participants annually. In total, we have 33 student organizations that are considered club sport teams here at Clemson. They have some unique things that apply to club teams here at Clemson, some things they receive maybe other organizations don’t and that our specific department provides for them – athletic training services, unique privileges to our spaces. But really my day-to-day just looks like acting as a liaison for those teams and a direct point of contact if they have questions. Generally speaking, I can help them get connected to what they need whether it’s funding or reserving spaces with us. I’m their go-to person. That’s my day-to-day. If we have teams that host events, games or practices at any of our facility spaces, I’m that person who reserves those things for them and oversees the student staff that supports games and events – things like that. I just start to finish help with overall operations of the Club Sports program.

Q: Take me through your journey to get to this point; you were a graduate assistant with Campus Rec prior to your full-time appointment, correct?

JONES: That is correct, yeah. My journey in Campus Recreation as a whole started in my undergraduate career. I’m originally from New Jersey and went to Rutgers University for my undergrad. I originally wanted to pursue sports psychology; that’s what I went in looking to do as an undergraduate student. But when I went for my first semester, my mom told me to get a job somewhere on campus and get that resume started – start building those connections to pursue sports psychology. She said, ‘Why don’t you go to the gym?’ That seems like a perfect entry way into making connections. Intramural Sports just happened to be tabling the day I went in, and I grew up playing basketball, so that was just kind of a natural fit. They were looking for basketball

officials, so I started with them first semester of my freshman year. I started as a basketball official and picked up a bunch of different sports along the way. Eventually, I became a student supervisor, clinician, student director – just continuing to make my way up the ladder. I was a part of that Intramural Sports program my entire four years of undergrad. Meanwhile, I was playing club basketball at Rutgers as well – kind of where the Club Sports side came into play.

I made my way to Clemson as a graduate assistant with Intramural Sports, and I served in that position starting in 2016 and graduated in 2018. I also was a part of the student affairs master’s program while I was here. In that role, I saw more of the Intramural Sports side of the house. I still have bits and pieces of that I help with in this role, but I left Clemson after graduating and went back to New Jersey to a smaller school. I knew I wanted to make my way back down south – I got bit by the South Carolina bug. I made my way back down here in August 2019, so I’ve been in this role for a little over two years as a full-time staff member.

Q: Tell me about the folks around you each and every day – your reporting structure with the organization and maybe some of the folks who are instrumental in helping you on a day to day basis?

JONES: I’m on the programs side of the Campus Rec house, if you will. A lot of folks, when they come into Fike Recreation Center, they see our operations staff that welcome them into the building, clean up equipment and those sorts of things. But, our programs student staff is more in the evening time specifically for Intramural and Club Sports. They help run club practices in the evenings. They are also the same staff that officiate intramural games – it’s all part of our sports programs staff. I help oversee those students. While you might not see them, they’re usually out at the fields, or down at the courts when we have stuff inside. We do have our own special group of sport programs – we call them assistants and managers. Those are folks who oversee those programs in the evenings. While I primarily oversee Club Sports, I do dabble a little bit in the Intramural Sports side of the house. That’s where I help my supervisor, Chris Cox – he’s

our associate director of sport programs. While he helps with Club Sports a little bit, he primarily oversees the Intramural Sports program along with our graduate assistant, Hannah Tompkins – who I was a couple of years ago. The three of us collectively help the Club Sports and Intramural Sports and call ourselves Sports Programs. Within that area of Campus Rec, we also have Robert Taylor. He’s pretty famous on campus; he’s been around a little bit. He leads that area, which also encompasses Sports Programs, Outdoor Education and Fitness/Wellness. Operations and Programs together makes up our whole Campus Recreation team.

Q: What’s it been like this semester, after having all of the changes in 2020-2021 because of COVID, to getting students back and engaged in out-of-classroom activities like Club Sports?

JONES: Absolutely. Everybody likes to use the word we had to pivot, but we definitely had to all of last year. Things looked very different last year, especially with Club Sports. When COVID first hit us, we had to stop all operations – as a lot of people on campus had to. Our Club Sports teams couldn’t practice, whether they were in our facilities or off-campus. They couldn’t meet collectively or operate as a true club sport team would. A lot of them had to go home, didn’t have that friendship or social outlet outside of class. Couldn’t bond together as a club sports team. So, that was hard. We tried to pivot as much as we could, to provide teams an opportunity to bond – whether that was virtually or doing team workouts at home. We tried our best to still provide outlets for students to do things when COVID first hit us. We tried providing those opportunities for them. Then, last year, we slowly started returning to normal operations. We provided practices, but people still had to wear masks. We tried to do things as safely as we could to slowly resume operations with Club Sports. We tried to operate as close to normal as we possibly could, but this semester was when we really transitioned to I would say close to fully operational. Clubs could travel again, which is part of what makes it different from intramurals. They’re able to travel to different schools and also host teams here at our facilities and have games, tournaments and competitions.

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Even within our facility spaces as well, we’ve started opening up more things. We had a climbing competition this past weekend and our club swim team hosted a big invitational in the natatorium – which last year we couldn’t provide. We were limited on capacity numbers and COVID policies. This semester, we’ve kind of turned a corner and returned to almost full operations, which is awesome.

Q: As we get closer to finishing up the Fall semester, what are some of those club sports who are competing currently – and what does the transition to winter and spring look like?

JONES: A lot of our teams, actually I’d say close to all of them at this point have competed in some form or fashion. Whether they’re traveling or they’re hosting things at our facilities. Just thinking about this semester, club soccer – both men and women’s teams – hosted Soctoberfest tournament in the middle of October. We dance around when there’s home football games, and when there is an away game there’s pretty much something happening on campus with Club Sports. The soccer teams hosted across three days at Lightsey, Championship Field and LoConte. It was a super-large event that welcomes hundreds of participants to campus. They were coming from Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee and all over the Southeast. That was one of our largest ones this semester. Club climbing hosted one this past weekend. Club swim. Fencing, also that same weekend as Soctoberfest, hosted a Tiger Open Invitational in the basketball courts at Fike. They had all five basketball courts taken over. A lot have tryouts and practices, such as club baseball and softball – those that typically practice off-campus. They’re all currently active and practicing in that regard. As we transition into the spring, sports like lacrosse, frisbee and rugby – teams like that – tend to pick up when we enter the spring. But all of them are competing in some way.

Q: You’ve seen the evolution of recreational sports shift away from the traditional main campus footprint to the nearby Snow Family Outdoor Fitness and Wellness Complex – what makes that space so special for students?

JONES: It provides so many extra opportunities for students to get involved. For students who might have trouble accessing resources off-campus, it brings a lot younger students into the fold earlier than maybe joining as juniors or seniors when they have cars to get to certain places. Having those resources on-campus are super important. It allows us to open up the doors to more. Club Sports has its own ability to practice more and host more events and tournaments on campus. But also the Intramural Sports side of the house is opened up more as well and we can provide a wider range of sports that we couldn’t have done before, because we’re trying a balancing act of allowing enough time for clubs to have practices or events while also keeping our very popular Intramural Sports program thriving as well. Sports and recreation in general are super important as part of the college student experience and giving them an outlet outside of class. Club Sports in particular, our teams bond at practices and they have team dinners and community service events and different things like that. Giving them more of an opportunity to come together and recreate is super important, and that’s how those extra facilities and areas play into that.

Q: Looking at the landscape of Campus Rec here at Clemson, and how the University is growing, what are some of the biggest opportunities as it relates to Club Sports?

JONES: I think it provides an opportunity to get more students involved and get the word out more about what we have to offer. Maybe a misconception right now is that with Club Sports, if you’ve never played the sport before, you can’t participate in it. We have a range of teams that offer instructional and recreational types of sport, where you can get involved whether or not you’ve ever played or have been competitive. Opening up that enrollment and allowing more students lets us get more folks involved, get them out to sports more, recreating more and bringing more of them into the fold.

Q: In your opinion, why is health and wellness so important in today’s higher education?

JONES: Mental health is becoming and has been something that has been brought to the forefront more recently the past several years. There have been several studies done that suggestion getting active – whatever that looks like for someone, whether it’s coming to the gym and participating in a fitness class, going on an outdoor recreation trip, or playing intramurals once a week – that benefits one’s mental health and having a more balanced lifestyle and translating that into the classroom. There have been studies done that show physical activity leads to retention on a college campus, better grades and better overall health. Playing a role in that and increasing students’ mental health is important.

Q: When you are away from work, what sort of interests or hobbies do you have?

JONES: Fun question. I actually live up in Greenville, South Carolina. I live in between Travelers Rest and downtown Greenville, so I like getting outdoors as much as I can. I have easy access to the Swamp Rabbit Trail. Getting outside is great for me. And I love eating out – whether that’s cooking for myself at home or trying different recipes for myself, or going out somewhere and exploring new places. That’s usually what I like to do on weekends, hanging out with friends or getting outside. I also can be a home body as well. Exercising is a big thing as well; it helps me stay focused and keeps me sane day-to-day. That’s what I like to do outside of work.

Q: What’s your favorite thing about working at Clemson, that you’ve found so far?

JONES: It may sound cliché, for me it’s the students. Our student staff are some of my favorite people to hang out with. Not only that, but we have a Club Sports Association made up of four students who are our executive board. They’re different representatives of teams. Hanging out with them, talking with them and seeing how classes are going, how they’re leading their teams. That’s some of the special parts of my job. Seeing students who started with me when I was here as a G.A. and now they’re

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graduating, getting jobs – seeing that full circle of development is super cool for me. The students are definitely No. 1, I would say.