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# Sports bring together communities and build relationships

**BY BRENNA DEMPSEY**  
*Executive Producer*

Community and connections go hand-in-hand when it comes to sports.

When people go to watch a game, they end up surrounded by people who are there for the same reason. This allows people to find a common interest and connect with those around them while they have a good time and celebrate their favorite sporting event.

Hannah Fewkes, a freshman at Tarleton State University, grew up playing sports. She likes the connected feeling people get when they gather with other people for a game.

“Once you see everyone in there, we’re all in there for one purpose, and it just brings everyone from different majors and different sports together,” Fewkes said.

This is a sentiment that I am sure others can relate to because sports help to strengthen relationships we might already have.

“My family, we’ve all played soccer growing up, and my uncle especially, he was my coach for a long time, so it was kind of just like a part-of-the-family thing,” Fewkes said.

It can also help to build new relationships that might not have been a part of your life if it wasn’t for sports.

“It made me get involved in a way and then I started to enjoy what I was doing because of the people around me, and I got to see them every single day,” Fewkes said.

These friendships can last far into the future.

Taylor Ware fell in love with volleyball when she was little and has continued playing throughout the years.

“I made some of my best friends by playing volleyball, even here at Tarleton, I met some of my friends and some great people by playing,” Ware said.

Cason Green goes to the Tarleton recreation center to play basketball and volleyball with friends.

“There’s a big group of us that come nearly

every day and just getting to interact and build connections with each other, I mean, it’s been cool to see just since I’ve been here since last semester,” Green said.

Green became interested in volleyball in high school and wanted to play when he could, whether that was a workout or just for fun.

“I ended up getting involved in playing volleyball with a bunch of people who I’m pretty good friends with now,” Green said.

Even if they did not like sports, these are the feelings that would come to heart.

“I’d probably be a little offended ‘cause Tarleton is now a part of me. Like, this is my new home, so I’d kind of be offended, and I’d probably defend us,” Fewkes said. “It gives you team spirit and a sense of community, like that’s my community, and you’re not going to diss it.”

Growing alongside Tarleton makes it feel like a part of who we are, so insults to that progress can stir up feelings.

“I would kind of feel offended because it’s our school, and I mean Tarleton has changed a lot over the last 10 years, like growing and playing bigger schools, and it’s a lot different than playing a smaller school, even at a collegiate level,” Green said.

Texans bleed purple, and sports are no different.

“I would take it personally, I mean Tarleton is the best—the best in everything—whether it’s sports or not. I mean, this is my school,” Ware said.

From sports clubs, intermurals or NCAA sanctioned, sports on the Tarleton campus unite the students in different ways. Maybe it’s from finding someone that has played the same sport as you since you were little, maybe you try something new and find another place at the school or maybe it’s meeting someone in the concession stand line.

Whatever it may be, sports are just another thing to make Tarleton feel like a community; like a home.



The final basketball game to be played in Wisdom Gym on Saturday, March 9, 2025

Photo by: Hannah Brooks

# Leaving Wisdom Gym: *Starting a new tradition*

**BY HANNAH BROOKS**  
Multimedia Journalist

Tarleton State University's iconic Wisdom Gym, constructed in 1970, has served as the heart of the university's basketball and volleyball programs for more than five decades.

Wisdom Gym was named in honor of Coach William J. Wisdom, an all-sports coach, 1972.

Coach Wisdom led Tarleton basketball to 86 straight wins between 1934 and 1938, Texans know this feat as the "Wisdom streak."

Coach Wisdom also won 112 of 113 wins in a time span of seven years as the men's basketball coach

These achievements brought Wisdom into the Texas Sports Hall of Fame in 1971.

Recently, in August 2023, Tarleton State University broke ground on a new \$110 million event center, scheduled to open in fall 2025.

This 148,000-square-foot, two story facility will feature an integrated nutrition center, a sports medicine suite, custom locker rooms and a dedicated entrance for coaches and student-athletes.

The maple wood flooring system will be portable, making placing and removing the

specialized gym surface a breeze for the different events held.

What's in it for non-athletes and spectators?

According to the Tarleton Athletics page, the Event Center will also serve as the permanent host building for "academic symposiums, conferences, conventions, concerts, convocations and commencements."

The Office of The President stated that the Event Center will provide "seating (for) nearly 10,000 for concerts" and "up to 8,000 for basketball games."

This past Saturday night marked the last time a NCAA basketball game will be hosted in Wisdom Gym. With it, a couple of special things happened.

Before game number two of The Farewell Series, every senior basketball player was honored for their achievements in their time at Tarleton.

During halftime, dozens of alumni from multiple generations were welcomed onto the floor to be honored.

Among them, a special Tarleton Hall of Famer: the esteemed Lonn Reisman, who served as men's basketball coach from 1988 to

2018 and athletic director from 1993 to 2024.

To Jakorie Smith, a Tarleton basketball 2024 alumnus, Wisdom Gym will always be credited with shaping some of the most memorable moments of his college career.

"It's a bittersweet feeling... I wouldn't say I wish I would have played in the Event Center because I enjoyed my time in Wisdom," Smith said. "The fans were always supporting, and it felt like they were right on the floor with us."

Smith encapsulated sentiments of Texan Nation, saying, "Wisdom will always have a special place in my heart."

While at game two of The Farewell Series, P.A.N.K.U.S. (People Against Not Knowing University Spirit) members expressed how they were handling the shift.

"We're sad to leave as the hype really fills the space in a smaller gym, but we know how great the Event Center is going to be for the atmosphere overall," a P.A.N.K.U.S. member said.

All three school spirit groups, P.A.N.K.U.S., The Purple Poo and The Plowboys, attended these last two games.

At every game, the Plowboys and

P.A.N.K.U.S. were always in the front rows, right next to each other. The Poos, when not sat with them, roamed the gym spreading school spirit.

Wisdom Gym will continue to house the women's volleyball gym, Tarleton Athletics Hall of Fame and the trophy cases.

While emotions are torn between sadness, excitement and all in between, one thing rings true for Tarleton's new addition.

The Event Center has become a significant aspect of Tarleton's new chapter, allowing fans—both students and the community—to experience a more immersive and engaging experience at games: a true Division I experience.

This move fits into the larger vision of Tarleton State University's growth and development, both athletically and academically, being only one out of several in progress projects and expansions.

Wisdom has served Tarleton well, but its years have been fulfilled.

Here's to the good times had in Wisdom Gym and all else to come moving forward.

Go, Texans.



Photo by: Kayla Gale

Grant Gale and Cole Divin holding up their catches for the day.



Photo by: Helena Knutson

Two wrestling club members practicing new techniques on one another.



Photo by: Lydia White

Tarleton run club at their weekly meeting.

# Sports Clubs: What Tarleton has to offer

**BY ASHTYN HANSARD**  
*Digital Media Director*

Tarleton State University has always been striving for excellence, especially in athletics.

Whether it be in football or basketball, Tarleton is always looking for ways to get bigger and better.

However, these sports can be hard to get a spot on, and as a college student, it can be hard to find the time and commitment. Don't worry, Tarleton has you covered.

Tarleton offers many sports clubs of all varieties to students who are looking for other students to build a community with while playing a sport they enjoy.

## **Bass Fishing**

If you enjoy fishing, the bass club may be the place for you. The bass club competes in competitions across the country while strengthening their group and leadership skills. If interested, apply online by April 30 to join for the fall semester.

## **Equestrian**

The equestrian club is for students that have a passion for horse riding and would like to compete in the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association (IHSA). If you're interested, you can email Dr. Trinet Jones at [tnjones@tarleton.edu](mailto:tnjones@tarleton.edu).

## **Esports**

While it's not a traditional sport, Tarleton's esports club is available for all students that have a love for video games. Located on the

bottom floor of the student center, the esports club focuses on building hand-eye coordination skills while working as a team.

## **Fly Fishing**

Tarleton's fly fishing club is available for all students interested in expanding their fishing skills and learning more about how to fish in general. This club hosts different fishing meetings throughout the semester. To keep up to date, follow the club on Instagram @tsullyfishing.

## **Men's Lacrosse**

Tarleton's men's lacrosse club is a part of the Lone Star Alliance for the Men's Collegiate Lacrosse Association. Any male students that have a passion for lacrosse and may be interested in joining can contact the team through the email [tsulax247@gmail.com](mailto:tsulax247@gmail.com).

## **Men's Soccer**

Tarleton's men's soccer club is available for all males that have an interest in competing in the sport for the Texas Collegiate Soccer League. While tryouts have already concluded earlier this semester, students can follow the team through their Instagram, @tarletonclub-soccer.

## **Men's Rugby**

Much like the lacrosse team, the men's rugby team is open to any male students that have an interest in playing rugby with other students and is a member of the Lone Star Conference. Students can stay updated through their Instagram, @tarleton\_rugby.

## **Powerlifting**

Tarleton's powerlifting club is available for all students that enjoy lifting competitively. While there hasn't been one announced this semester, the club hosted an interest meeting for potential members in the fall. You can follow them on Instagram, @tarletonstate.powerliftingclub

## **Running**

The running club is a great way for cardio lovers to get their runs in while making new friends. While the club does not have a social media page yet, they meet twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays and run together at all different paces.

## **Shotgun Sports**

This club is open to all students hoping to learn about shooting guns competitively and build a connection with others. All members will be asked to provide their own guns and ammo and can apply to join the team through the link on their Instagram, @tarletonshotgun-sports.

## **Spikeball**

On Jan. 21, Tarleton's recreation center posted online that a new spikeball club has been created. If you're a fan of the game and are interested in joining the club, email [kford@tarleton.edu](mailto:kford@tarleton.edu) for more information.

## **Stock Horse**

The stock horse team helps students build better horse training skills while competing in competitions. While the dates haven't been updated, students can find a membership form to fill out on Tarleton's website.

## **Tennis**

The tennis club offers all students of all skill levels to join their club and even has a separate competition team that travels to different colleges to compete. Meetings are held on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. at the tennis courts.

## **Ultimate Frisbee**

For all the ultimate frisbee players out there, Tarleton has a club for you. The ultimate frisbee club meets on Mondays from 9 p.m. to 11 p.m. A google form to apply to the club is linked on their Instagram, @tarletonultimate.

## **Volleyball**

While Tarleton does have an official women's volleyball team, it also has volleyball clubs available for both men and women. While tryouts for both teams have concluded, students can follow the men's Instagram pages @tsu\_mensvb, and the women's facebook page, Tarleton Women's Club Volleyball.

## **Wrestling**

Much like the club volleyball teams, Tarleton's wrestling club has both a women's and men's team available for all students who want to explore wrestling competitively and enhance their skills. Students can find out more through their website, [tsuwrestling.org](http://tsuwrestling.org).

Tarleton offers several sports clubs for its students to enjoy and create a community with. If you're interested in sports and want to make some new friends, feel free to check out any of these clubs.

# The Leader and the Legacy:

## *Steve Uryasz's Journey to Tarleton*

BY ZOE LAM

Contributing Writer

The position of an athletic director is one of the most challenging and life changing jobs within collegiate athletics. For Steve Uryasz, the new athletic director at Tarleton State University, the journey to this position has been made by a combination of perseverance, adaptability and an unwavering commitment to developing his athletes, his programs and himself. His leadership comes at a monumental time as Tarleton continues its ambitious transition to NCAA Division I.

Born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, Uryasz's early experiences with sports paved a strong path for his career. Growing up next to a YMCA, he imbedded himself in athletics from a young age, refereeing games and even working alongside his siblings, who sold concessions at local events.

"It was a family ordeal," Uryasz said, recalling his upbringing.

Athletics was more than a hobby for the Uryasz family; it was a shared passion. His siblings went on to hold notable roles in sports administration: his sister was a high school athletics director at an all-girls school in Michigan and his brother worked for the NCAA and then owned the National Center for Drug Free Sports, further illustrating the family's deep connection to the industry.

Growing up in a family deeply rooted in sports, Uryasz learned the value of teamwork and shared goals. This is an attitude that he has carried into his role at Tarleton, where he has fostered a new sense of family within the athletics community.

"He's truly been a blessing to me," the assistant to the VP for athletics Terri Hardcastle said.

Despite his early experience, Uryasz didn't initially set out to become an athletic director.

"If you're asking me if I knew I wanted to be an AD (athletic director) early on, the answer is no," Uryasz said.

Uryasz's journey began in the academic side of things, tutoring student-athletes at the University of Nebraska. This role sparked his

interest in the connection of education and sports, leading him to positions at Oklahoma State, Texas Tech and the University of West Virginia, where he took on increasingly diverse responsibilities, including academic programming, fundraising and administrative leadership.

While his career is now more focused on athletics, Uryasz never strayed far from the academic side, earning admiration from colleagues who appreciate his ability to bridge the gap between supporting student-athletes' education and enhancing their athletic experiences.

Dr. Eileen Faulkenberry, the Tarleton Faculty Athletics Representative, particularly appreciates him for his effective communication.

"[Steve] is very personable. When you're talking to him, it seems as if you are the most important thing to him in that moment even though he might have to do 15,000 other things to do. You are the most important person at that moment, which is an amazing skill to have," Faulkenberry said.

One of the defining aspects of Uryasz's career is his willingness to embrace challenges. He credits an early piece of advice "Take the job," for shaping his approach.

"A lot of times people are waiting for the perfect job. There is no such thing," Uryasz said.

This mindset led Uryasz to roles that might not have seemed ideal at the time but ultimately prepared him for greater responsibilities.

Transitioning from academic responsibilities and fundraising at Texas Tech allowed him to develop new skills and broaden his impact. Uryasz's ability to adapt has become a staple throughout his career, resulting in his position as Tarleton's athletic director.

Navigating the difficulties of collegiate athletics hasn't been without its challenges. Uryasz has faced tough personnel decisions and the challenges of managing change within programs. He relies on a network of trusted peers for guidance, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and mentorship.

"You always have people. That's the theme in our business," Uryasz said.

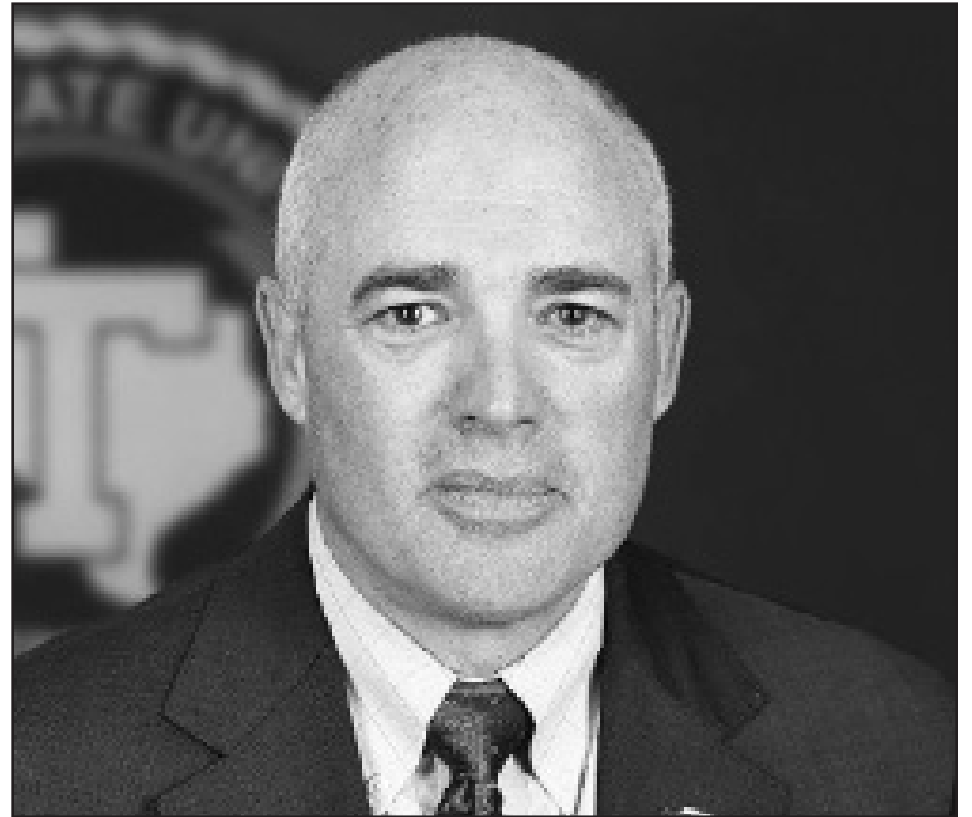


Photo courtesy of: Tarleton Marketing

### **Tarleton's newly elected athletic director, Steve Uryasz.**

At Tarleton, balancing aspiration with realism is one of his primary challenges.

"You have to pick two or three projects and do those really well; you can't have all 23 right away," Uryasz said.

This approach is especially relevant as Tarleton establishes itself in Division I, where resources must be strategically assigned to ensure maintainable growth.

As a leader, Uryasz is committed to passing on the lessons he's learned to his colleagues and student-athletes. He emphasizes the importance of setting realistic goals and building from there, particularly for new programs like Tarleton's soccer team. His approach encourages patience and drive while maintaining high standards for success. Uryasz's journey from academics to athletic administration serves as a blueprint for young professionals.

His advice is simple but reflective: "Don't wait for the perfect opportunity. Take the job and build from there."

Under Uryasz's leadership, Tarleton State is well positioned to make its mark in Division I athletics. His vision for the program is ambitious yet realistic, focusing on both competitive success and the overall development of student-athletes.

"It's about creating an environment where athletes can thrive in all aspects of their lives," he said.

As he continues to lead Tarleton through this exciting chapter, Uryasz remains guided by the principles that have defined his career: adaptability, collaboration and a passion for sports. His journey beginning as a young boy refereeing games in Omaha, to an athletic director at a rising Division I program, serves as a demonstration to the power of perseverance and the impact of thoughtful leadership.

# From overlooked believer to best kept secret: *Darius Cooper has the NFL in his sites*

**BY GAVIN PATRICK**  
*Sports Editor*

The NFL is a dream 98% of college football players don't get to experience. Some are not talented enough; some are overlooked; some don't even want to make the jump.

So the 2% that do (1.6% to be exact) have to have something special, right? And a little luck along the way?

Good thing there's a case study from Tarleton State University. His name is Darius Cooper.

For the last three years, it was almost impossible to watch a Texan football game without seeing Cooper pop off the screen. He was part of the university's first Division I recruiting class and reached a level of play that Tarleton State had never seen before — or come to expect.

Cooper left Tarleton as its all-time leader in receiving yards with 3,185. In 2024, he led the FCS with 1,450 receiving yards, which was second across all of NCAA Division I, with 14 touchdowns to boot on 76 catches.

Now, Cooper is training in Midlothian, Texas, with a group of athletes and instructors, getting in the best shape of his life for his pro day at UNT on March 21, where NFL teams are sure to take notice.

But like most NFL hopefuls, Cooper's numbers barely begin to tell the story.

Cooper grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, where he only received three collegiate offers coming out of Hazelwood West High School. Two were from Division II schools; the other was from one transitioning out of Division II: Tarleton State University.

"I had a really good feeling that [Darius] was a really high-character young man," Tarleton head coach Todd Whitten said. "He had a wonderful mother who was [there] with him on the trip. He had very good parenting... So, I knew, I just knew he was a real quality person, and that meant a lot."

Cooper's character has always shined, but he wasn't a star right away. He actually had never played wide receiver before Tarleton State; that's because he was a quarterback, one that came in with loads of raw athletic ability.

The plan was for Cooper to spend his first

year at quarterback, and if it didn't work out, he would be moved to another position. It only took Cooper two weeks into his first training camp to come to a conclusion.

"I kinda got in his ear a little early, off the radar, and said, 'Hey, you look really good at receiver now, man. Why don't you come on?'" wide receivers coach and son of Todd Whitten, Tate Whitten, said. "And a couple days after that, that's when he went up and he said, 'I think I wanna try receiver.' So, I cheated just a little bit in that. I got ahead of the game."

The "funny" part, as Cooper put it, was that his favorite position had always been wide receiver; his coaches just never saw the fit until that point. Cooper said he's thankful, though, to have started at quarterback because it gave him a deeper understanding of the game from a bird's-eye view.

"You see the whole field as a quarterback," Cooper said. "So when I moved to receiver... it was kinda easy to gauge and see different coverages and see how people disguise[d] things and see if they [were] in man or zone coverage. It was kind of easy for me to read at receiver 'cause I was so used to seeing it all at quarterback. ... I think it even slowed the game down for me even more."

Cooper started making plays in practice from day one as a receiver, turning heads of the coaching staff who thought they'd have to wait much longer to see their investment pay off.

"He was already doing stuff that you really can't coach," Tate Whitten said. "Really instinctual."

Cooper's breakout came in Tarleton's first game against a Power 5 opponent, the TCU Horned Frogs, in 2022. The newly minted wideout was tasked with facing two future NFL corners, the main of which was Tre'Vius Hodges-Tomlinson, who won the Jim Thorpe Award as the nation's top defensive back that year.

In the words of his head coach, Cooper "did a number" on both of them, finishing the game with six catches, 117 yards and a touchdown against the future runner-ups for the national title.

That day, a legend was born.

"That was kinda when we and everyone else knew that we had a really good player there," Todd Whitten said.

Cooper had rousing success his sophomore year. The TCU game showed he could do it against top competition, and 1,063 yards and nine touchdowns later, other schools came calling. They wanted to pull him out of Stephenville.

"He would've been able to have gone just about anywhere he wanted," Todd Whitten said. "Probably, the number of offers would have been well into the teens, maybe 20."

These weren't just any schools. Cooper had offers from Power 5 programs, including in the Big 10, that would have given him better exposure against top competition and a better chance to prove himself to NFL scouts.

Yet, after realizing the family he had at Tarleton—the love and unity they had built with him and lots of prayer—Cooper chose to stay.

Like many others who had come before, Cooper had fallen in love with the culture. Not many players who come to Tarleton end up transferring out, and Cooper wasn't about to break that mold.

"Coming off that '22 season, I wanted to make sure that I was playing," Cooper said. "I needed to be on the field. That was part of the reason why I stayed because I knew I had a spot, and I knew we [were] growing as a university, so that's exposure in itself. So, really just knowing that it's up to God — it don't matter where you go. If you have talent, the league is going to find you, and that's kinda what I led on."

It doesn't matter to Cooper if he is a first-round pick or the last pick. He just wants a chance.

"It just comes down to the kind of person he is," Todd Whitten said. "He was really loyal to our program. We gave him a chance when nobody else would, and so that meant something to him."

It's so rare for a player to stay at one school for five years in the transfer portal era, but Cooper is a different breed. By the end of it, the once overlooked, dual-threat quarterback who had never played receiver in his life had blossomed into one of the best players in college

football.

And not just that — he got his degree, too. Cooper has had a passion for physical therapy since he left high school, and he earned his degree in kinesiology upon graduation in December; so when he's not playing football, he can give back to the sport he plays.

"Definitely [had] to get the degree. [I'm a] student-athlete. School comes first," Cooper said. "My mom embedded that in me since I was a young boy. School comes before sports, so I definitely had to get the degree first."

Cooper was one of the top student-athletes in the country. He maintained close to a 4.0 GPA his entire time at Tarleton and was recognized in January with a spot on the 2024 Academic All-American Team, selected by College Sports Communicators, one of just 53 NCAA Division I players to receive the honor.

Coach Tate Whitten, called him a "unicorn."

"We keep lists of guys who get in trouble and that we've gotta maybe have some kind of punishment for, but [Darius] was never on a list," Todd Whitten said. "His grades were always good... Darius Coopers don't come along all that often. He's as fine a young man as I've ever worked with."

Todd Whitten shared an instance of Cooper using his platform to help his community after receiving \$10,000 from Tarleton's "Bleed Purple" NIL collective. Cooper wanted to save the money and invest, so Whitten helped set up a meeting for him with a financial adviser.

"So, you got 10,000 to invest?" the adviser asked Cooper.

"Nope, I have 8,000," Cooper responded.

The adviser laughed and said, "So you've already spent 2,000 of it?"

And Cooper said, "Well, I tied 10 percent to my church (1,000), and I put new tires on my car (the other 1,000)."

Safe to say, he had things under control.

"How many 20-year-olds, as soon as they get paid, give 10 percent to their church? Coop does. So, like that financial advisor said, 'I've never heard of that,'" Todd Whitten said, laughing. "But, y'know, that's Darius Cooper."

No one benefited from Cooper's time at Tarleton more than his quarterback, Victor Gaba-

lis. What made them click on the field, physical attributes aside, was their relationship off it.

Per Gabalis, Cooper is a master at controlling his emotions.

“He didn’t say things just to say them,” Gabalis said.

Cooper made things fun by knowing how to relate with “being goofy” and “having a lot of energy” but also “flipping the switch” when it was time to get serious.

“He did the same thing with other guys, and it just created bonds,” Gabalis said. “Everybody talks about in the locker room how we miss having DC around.”

In terms of the ease he had throwing Cooper the ball, Gabalis described it as an “easy 10.”

“They were a lot of looks, especially in that last game with South Dakota, [where] there were not looks for me to throw the ball at all, and I just would pull it because we would be on the same page, and he knew where I was gonna place the ball,” Gabalis said. “There was multiple plays in that [South Dakota] game where he and I never had ever talked about certain things, and we would just have a mind-to-mind connection mid-play, just completely off-script.”

The South Dakota game Gabalis referenced came in the second round of the FCS Playoffs in December. It was perhaps the finest moment of Cooper’s college career – and also his last.

Facing the FCS’s seventh ranked scoring defense, Cooper exploded for nine catches, 161 yards and three touchdowns in Tarleton’s 31-42 loss. It was a whale of a game that followed his 11-catch, 190-yard, 1-touchdown performance in the first round against Drake University.

While preparing for those games, Cooper said he gave all his “worries, anxiety and nervousness” to God. Praying is not a special routine for the wide receiver. Marrying the mind to the body is critical for athletes, and Cooper has found his way.

“By the time that the games were coming, I was so locked in from just, first of all, being ready, being excited to play the game, and then being steadfast in my word and just praying and seeking God,” Cooper said. “I’m definitely grateful for him putting me in that position to be as explosive as possible. And it was quite fun, man. I can’t complain.”

When the moment got bigger, Cooper played bigger, and those around him couldn’t be more proud.

“That was definitely special to see, definitely,” Tate Whitten said. “Whenever we needed

him, he was there.”

Now, with the NFL in his sights, Cooper is focused on showcasing parts of his game that he didn’t show in college. The offensive scheme at Tarleton was “fairly simple,” as Cooper put it, and he was only asked to run a few routes.

Alongside his receivers coach in Midlothian, Cooper has been working hard at running routes he didn’t run at Tarleton, and he’s excited to showcase them at his pro day.

“If you need me to run a route, I’m gonna run it,” Cooper said. “When it comes to whips, outs, corners, post curls... C routes – anything that you can think of. I feel like I have a lot of confidence in myself and am more than capable of getting that route done.”

But despite the work-ethic, high character and production at his disposal, Cooper is already being overlooked by NFL evaluators.

There were 13 FCS players invited to the NFL Scouting Combine in Indianapolis this year.

Cooper was not one of them, nor was he invited to any other pre-draft events for top prospects, like the Senior Bowl (an event he was on the watchlist for prior to last season) and the East-West Shrine Bowl.

To rub it in, a wide receiver from Abilene Christian, Blayne Taylor, was invited to the Shrine Bowl, and Cooper was not.

But this doesn’t bother Cooper at all. Rather, he chooses to not be bothered by staying steadfast in his faith.

“I feel like God just kept me away from those things so I can really focus on and lock in training to have a great pro day,” Cooper said. “So, I don’t look into all of the other things, people getting invited; it’s just a distraction in life. If you focus on that, then you[re] not focused on what you need to be focused on, which is working hard to get better every day.”

Cooper’s first goal is to make a 53-man roster on an NFL team – whatever that entails. He won’t start as a number one receiver, but he has experience playing on special teams, which is a role young players often find themselves in as the reason they made the team.

“What can I do for the team? That’s what I want people to know about me,” Cooper said. “I’m not a selfish receiver or anything like that. I want to do whatever I need to do for us to win, so special teams is big for me. I love being a part of special teams. Whatever you need me at, I’m gonna give my all. ... It’s about we, not me.”

The mottos Cooper lives by has allowed



Photo by: Vision19photography

**Darius Cooper does field work at DeSoto High School in preparation for Tarleton State's pro day in March.**

him to put everything in perspective. He knows “football is not going to last forever” and that he has to have “a reason to be there” – besides the fact that he loves the game.

With Cooper, it all comes back to God. That’s why he will make it apparent to “share the gospel” and “spread love” through his NFL family.

“Of course, I want to be great in the league when it comes to stats and accolades and everything like that. And that’s going to come,” Cooper said. “My main goal is just being the Godly man that I need to be [who] satisfies God and impacts lives. Whoever I meet, I wanna impact their life in a positive way.”

There are four players from Tarleton State in the modern era that have ever been drafted to the NFL. Today, there is just one active player that bleeds purple and white: E.J. Speed, who went in the fifth round to the Indianapolis Colts in 2019 and is now a starting linebacker.

Cooper didn’t have the luxury of meeting with teams at the combine, nor will he have

all 32 give him a hard look. But those closest to Cooper believe that his physical tools, high character, mental capacity and emotional intelligence give him an “excellent” chance to salvage a pro career and join that 2%.

“If they don’t draft him, that’s just the dumbest thing,” Gabalis said. “The dude is a freak. You don’t want a freak on your team? I would if I’m a quarterback. As soon as a team drafts him, they’re gonna realize they got a steal.”

Coach Tate Whitten felt similarly.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if that dude turned out to be the president of the United States,” Tate Whitten said. “He can do whatever he wants.”

Either way, the work never ends. No matter Cooper’s place in life, “working, working, working” will always be the main focus.

“I’m not satisfied till I make it to heaven,” Cooper laughed. “God wakes us up every day to be better. So, that’s the goal: be better.”



Jaycie Bass taking control of the ball mid-game.

Photo by: Andrew Loewe

## Bass reflects on her soccer journey at Tarleton State

**BY LESLIE POSADAS**

*Multimedia Journalist*

Following in her family's footsteps, Jaycie Bass, a student at Tarleton State University, has found her place on the soccer field.

Growing up with a mother who played soccer at the collegiate level and a brother who followed in her footsteps, Bass was introduced to the sport from a young age.

"I started playing soccer when I was four, and a fun fact is that my first word was 'ball' because I was around soccer so much," Bass said. "But I don't think I truly fell in love with the sport until I was 10, when I joined my first competitive team."

Despite facing challenges like a knee injury her sophomore year, Bass continues to excel both on and off the field.

"During my sophomore year of college, I suffered a knee injury in preseason that sidelined me for three weeks," Bass said. "It was one of my first major injuries, and I wasn't sure how to handle not being able to play the sport I love."

With the support of her soccer community, Bass overcame the challenge.

"The most challenging part of my recovery was getting back into game-shape for the fast-paced matches," Bass said. "I overcame this challenge by leaning on my teammates and coaching staff, staying positive and doing

my best to cheer them on from the sidelines. Although I couldn't physically contribute on the field, I made sure to support my teammates and stay focused on our collective success."

Rex Carell, assistant coach for the women's soccer team, has witnessed the growth of Bass on and off the field since 2022.

"Jaycie has grown a lot since she got here. She's become heavily involved socially on campus, and communication is definitely a strength of hers on the field," Carell said.

From the beginning, Bass has been passionate not only about soccer but also about Tarleton.

"I chose to continue my soccer career here because I fell in love with the school during my

visit," Bass said. "Every aspect of Tarleton felt like home to me, and I think it was unique to be able to help build a program from the ground up. After three years here, I can confidently say I made the right decision to be a Texan."

Andrew Loewe, the soccer sports information director, has firsthand seen Bass become more outspoken and helpful.

"By working with Jaycie Bass over the last two years, I've seen her take on a leadership role, being outspoken and always willing to help," Loewe said. "For example, during social media filming and media days, she helps direct the other players, making sure they stay on task, and is always eager to participate."

# Beyond the net:

## *Emma Halcomb's journey on and off the court*

BY LINDSEY HUGHES

Art Director

Emma Halcomb is a Tarleton State University student pursuing a master's in marketing and dominating on the court and in the sand. Halcomb played on the women's volleyball team for five seasons and is currently on her second season with the Tarleton Beach Volleyball team. She has played in 135 matches for the purple and white during her years on the women's volleyball team since 2019.

Halcomb started her journey with the sport over 16 years ago at just eight years old. She says the reason she got into volleyball so young was her mother.

"My mom played volleyball in high school, and she kind of just threw me into it... I tried lots of different sports, and volleyball was the only one that stuck," Halcomb said.

Halcomb graduated from Marcus High School in 2019, where she lettered two years on the varsity team. She also played club volleyball, where she was given her team's Most Improved award. Halcomb credits her high school coaches for her decision to attend and play for Tarleton.

"Both of my high school coaches actually played here at Tarleton; that's how I figured out what Tarleton was... I went to a game with them at TWU (Texas Woman's University) in Denton, and I loved everything about them. I went to visit here in February of my senior year, and it just felt like home as soon as I stepped on campus," Halcomb said.

Volleyball is a huge part of Halcomb's life, which makes her day-to-day look a little different than the average student. Her days consist not just of classes, but of a lot of training as well.

Halcomb also travels pretty frequently for volleyball, meaning she has gotten very used to being on the go with her team.

"On travel days, it looks a little different. The past two weekends, we have left on Thursdays at 9 a.m., drove down to Kingsville, gotten to unload for about an hour, got some food, and then went to practice for an hour," Halcomb said. "It really just depends on what type of day it is. But yeah, pretty busy I would say."

Halcomb believes that her age plays a large role into her being a leader on the



**Emma Halcomb playing beach volleyball in the sand courts at Tarleton State.**

Photo by: Ray Borchert

team. Halcombs experience and seniority on a team consisting mostly of underclassmen, automatically making her a role model to younger, up-and-coming players.

"Leading by example is really what I try to do. I try to really put my faith on display around my teammates... making sure I'm being a good person to them on and off the court," Halcomb said.

Halcomb has been able to experience many things with her team over the past five seasons she's played for Tarleton, from helping the purple and white advance to the NCAA Division II regional tournament in 2019 of her freshman year, to becoming the second player in Tarleton's Division I history to notch 1000 career digs and many, many things in between.

During her sophomore seasons at Tarleton, Halcomb finished third-highest on the team

with 177 digs in 2020 and finished third on the team in 2021 with 237 digs.

Junior year, Halcomb received the CSC All-District Academic award, as well as the Texan Iron Champ award and Texan award, which she was chosen for by former women's volleyball coach Mary Schindler.

As a senior, Halcomb notched a career high of 431 digs, 68 assists, 14 service aces and a kill, as well as becoming the only player in the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) to have a match of 30 or more digs.

While she has certainly collected many awards and experiences throughout her college volleyball career, Halcomb has a couple of favorite moments that stick with her closely.

"I would say my sophomore year, we beat TCU (Texas Christian University) twice, home and away, and that was just the coolest thing

ever," Halcomb said. "During our first season together last year, we beat SFA (Stephen F. Austin) in beach volleyball, and they are kind of Tarleton's rival, so that was really cool."

Off the court, Halcomb has a diverse set of interests and career goals, proving that you can be a star athlete and still have a life outside of your sport.

Halcomb is dedicated to immersing herself in the health world and loves to spend time with the Lord. After graduation, she has plans to continue her passion for health.

"The goal is to be a medical device sales rep. after volleyball... and then maybe something on the side like a fitness coach," Halcomb said.

Halcomb is set to graduate in May 2025 and is excited to start the next phase of her life after college volleyball.

# Tarleton sports fan survival guide

BY CAROLINE CRAIN

*News Editor*

From packed stands to roaring crowds, game days at Tarleton State University are an experience like no other. But a great game day always starts with being prepared.

Whether you're heading to a football game, a soccer match or any of Tarleton's many sporting events, we've got the tips you need to survive—and even thrive—on game day.

## **Bring your ticket**

Your ticket into the event is step one for attending any sporting event. If you're a current member of Tarleton, such as a student or staff member, you can claim your free ticket online. If you're not a student or faculty, or if you want to reserve special seating, you'll need to buy one.

If you have your Texan Card, it can serve as a general admission ticket into the event and can even be used to grab some snacks from the concession stand if you have Texan Bucks.

## **Arrive early for the best seat in the house**

We all know the best spots fill up fast, especially for big games. If you're going for general seating and want to get a prime spot with an awesome view, show up early and snag your seat before the rush. Arriving early can also give you a chance to watch warmups, beat the concession lines and soak in the pre-game atmosphere.

## **Dress for the Weather**

No one wants to be caught in a downpour or roasting under the sun during a game, especially for outdoor sports, so prepare for the elements.

Early season fall games heat up quickly, so dressing lightly and staying cool is important for your health and safety. For spring matches, sudden rain showers are common, so having a poncho, rain jacket or umbrella can be a



**Tarleton fans party with the Purple Poo at Wisdom Gym.**

**Photo by: Caroline Crane**

game-saver. Winter games, especially late football season, can get chilly, so gloves, a coat and a beanie go a long way in keeping you comfortable. And no matter the temperature, don't forget to hydrate – your body will thank you.

## **Get the Tarleton Sports app**

Did you know the Tarleton Sports app isn't just for checking scores?

Anyone can download it and start earning fan rewards. You can participate in trivia, earn points and even have a chance to win fan gear.

Attending games and checking in through the app allows you to accumulate points that can be redeemed for Nike apparel, backpacks and other exclusive Tarleton merchandise.

Drew Banks is the Assistant Director of Marketing and Fan Engagement at Tarleton, and he plays a key role in the fan rewards efforts.

"Just simply showing up and checking in ends up benefiting people in the long run," Banks said. "The fan rewards app can earn you a lot of benefits that, quite frankly, not a lot of people are taking advantage of currently, and it's very easy to use."

The app is also used to select winners for special giveaways, such as game-worn jerseys and other prizes. Additionally, fans who attend events in-person have a chance to be chosen for in-game promotions, including free throw contests and full court putts, where they have a

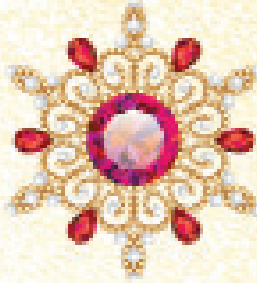
shot at even more prizes.

## **Bring Your School Spirit**

Let's be real – the most important thing you can bring to any game is your school spirit. Wear your purple with pride, prepare your loudest cheers and get ready to raise the spirit of Oscar P. The more energy you bring, the better the game will feel for everyone.

"My favorite game day essential has got to be school spirit," sophomore Emma Rodriguez said. "Wearing purple, being loud and just showing up proud for the team – that's what really makes the game day experience special."

With these simple tips, Tarleton fans are sure to be on track to making the most out of the plethora of sporting events hosted on the campus.



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Luca Kotscho practicing for his event: tie-down roping. Rodeo, page 18 and 19

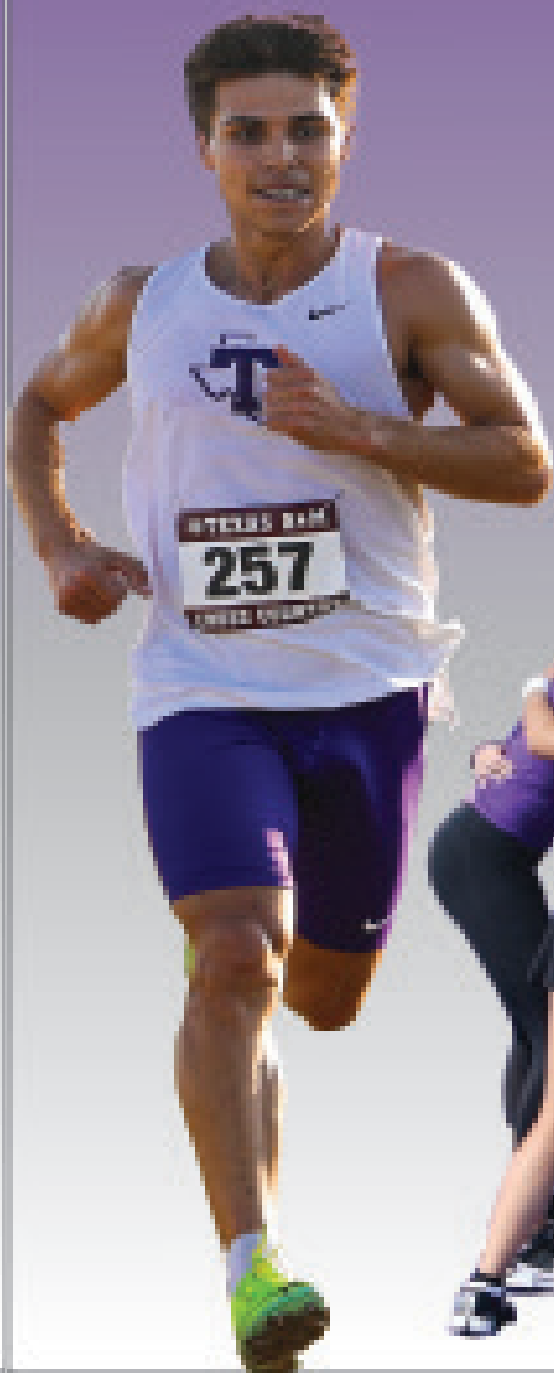
Jaycie Buss kicking the ball at her game. Women's soccer, page 8.

Emma Halcomb serving the ball. Volleyball, page 23.

Jace Poole  
running towards  
the finish line.  
Track and field,  
page 15.

Sofia DeGroot,  
WAC Most  
Outstanding  
Field Athlete.  
Track and field,  
page 15.

Tarleton Tennis  
team huddled  
up. Track and field,  
page 22.



# Buffalo Wild Wings opens in Stephenville

BY HAELEY CARPENTER

Editor-in-Chief

Ever since Tarleton State University announced the addition of a Buffalo Wild Wings as an on campus option, students have been counting down the days until it opens.

The ribbon cutting ceremony was held on Monday, March 10, just in time for March Madness.

Tarleton's 16th President Dr. James Hurley is known for upgrading the Tarleton campus to "have and be the best."

"This is the first Buffalo Wild Wings on a University campus," Hurley said during his speech at the ceremony.

Because this new restaurant is on campus, Sodexo had a major role in bringing in the new restaurant.

"This wouldn't be possible without our extraordinary partnership with Sodexo," Hurley said. "They have to feed tens or thousands of students a day, and they do a remarkable job."

Because Buffalo Wild Wings is technically an on campus restaurant, it is open for everyone to enjoy. While Stephenville already has a Wingstop, more options for the community to gather and build connections is always welcomed.

"It just gives us a great opportunity for us to be able to get to know each other and just be able to expand and connect about Stephenville and Tarleton," Dr. Ortega-Feerick said. "I'm the VP (vice president) of students so I think any time students and community can come together is just a great opportunity to collaborate."

After the ribbon was cut, people sat, ate, drank and enjoyed the sunny day. The first open day went well: lines of people waited from the moment the doors opened to when they closed.

"Look at the view, it's beautiful. You can enjoy some good wings and a nice day," Dr. Ortega-Feerick said.

This new dining option fits 350 people with outdoor and indoor seating for beautiful days.



Photo by: Haeley Carpenter

Dr. James Hurley cuts the ribbon at grand opening of the Buffalo Wild Wings on campus.

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# Tarleton runners busy year-round

**BY BETHANY KILPATRICK**

*Multimedia Journalist*

From cross country season to track and field season, the runners of Tarleton State University are speedy, driven and beaming with purple pride.

The athletes on the Tarleton cross country team who compete in the fall also take part in the track and field season that began in December 2024. The cross country team saw a successful season in the fall and is off to a great start in track and field.

Tarleton athlete, Jace Poole, is from Leander, Texas, and is academically classified as a junior. He has been competing collegiately for three years, one and a half at Tarleton after transferring from Texas A&M University.

“After entering the transfer portal, I ended up choosing Tarleton because of the team culture and atmosphere, and the direction the team was heading into looked very promising,” Poole said. “I knew that choosing Tarleton would provide me many great opportunities to compete and be surrounded by great people that want to be successful.”

With a highly time-consuming practice schedule during the fall and spring semesters, the athletes on the cross country and track and field teams stay extremely busy. However, the practice schedule does not differ greatly between the two seasons.

“We start practice anywhere between 6-6:30 a.m., Monday through Friday,” Poole said. “Then, a long run on Saturday. Training for the fall has more volume, as we are training for 8K and 10K races, and track is different in the sense that we are adding in a lot more speed work and technical drills as well.”

Maintaining excellent relationships among team members greatly impacts each athlete when they begin to face the many challenges of being a student athlete.

“The bond between my teammates and I is great,” Poole said. “Since the start of cross country season in the fall, I’ve developed such great relationships with my teammates. We all get along very well and put the team first before anything else. My teammates and I are very encouraging to each other, and we are all determined to accomplish team goals together.”

The team experienced an exceptional cross country season this past fall alongside their

new head coach, Bobby Carter.

“The team and I were all on the same page this past cross country season from the moment we came back to campus in August,” Poole said. “With having a new coach coming in for cross country, we all didn’t know what to expect. But we collectively remained optimistic and ready to have a great cross country season regardless. As the season kicked off, the team dynamic only got stronger.”

By the end of the cross country season, the team had many exciting accomplishments to share.

“Cross country ended in November, and the team and I were very happy with how the season went,” Poole said. “We placed fourth as a team in our conference meet, which is the highest placing finish in program history for Tarleton cross country. Also, we placed ninth as a team at the regional meet, which is a great start for it being our first 10K.”

While there was much growth as a team, Poole was able to celebrate many personal accomplishments as well.

“This past cross country season was my first official year running in uniform for a university, so I had a lot of accomplishments that were made,” Poole said. “I ran sub twenty four minutes for the 8K, which was a minute and a half PR (personal record) for me. I also competed in Tarleton’s Division I regional cross country meet, which is a 10K race. During that race, I was Tarleton’s number one [runner] and ran sub 31 minutes for the 10K.”

The team celebrated everyone’s accomplishments in the past cross country season and has ambitious attitudes about the current track and field season. The indoor track and field season began on Dec. 5, 2024, at the Wichita State-Heskett Center in Wichita, Kansas.

“The team overall this current indoor season is looking great,” Poole said. “The women’s and men’s teams are excited and hungry to represent Tarleton at the highest level.”

Poole has already accomplished much thus far into the current track and field season. He set a personal record in the 3K race and has a goal to score at future meets in all events he competes in, which includes the 1500, 3K and 5K.

The team recently competed at the 2025



Photo by: Tanner Verplancke

**Sofia DeGroot, Coach Carter and Amelie Monzie posing for a photo after a pair of top five finishes in the triple jump at the 2025 WAC Indoor Track and Field Championships**

Western Athletic Conference (WAC) Indoor Track and Field Championships in Spokane, Washington, which began on Feb. 28 and ended March 1.

The team concluded the meet in Washington with impressive results. One of which was the women’s team finishing in second place, which is the highest finish as a team that Tarleton’s track and field team has celebrated since joining the WAC.

Sofia DeGroot is a sophomore at Tarleton from Lubbock, Texas, and is not a part of the cross country team but has been a part of the track and field team for two years. She competes in the triple jump and long jump events, and she was named the WAC’s most outstanding field athlete at the conference meet in Washington.

“This track season, I have hit personal bests for both of my events indoors,” DeGroot said. “I placed second in [the] WAC championships for long jump (5.90m) and for triple jump (12.61m).”

Carter has high hopes for the current track and field season.

“The goals of this track season are to win and be intentional in everything that we do,” Carter said. “We of course want to be ranked

in the top 25 nationally as a program. We want to be recognized nationally, be top contenders at the conference meet and break every school record.”

While the team offers impressive skills and continuous growth, DeGroot explained other factors that drew her to compete for Tarleton.

“I chose Tarleton because the team atmosphere seemed different than everywhere else,” DeGroot said. “I could tell that they cared more about just track and wanted to build relationships with one another.”

While Poole and DeGroot show great appreciation for their coach, their coach also thinks highly of his athletes.

“Jace and Sofia are not only great athletes but also great students and great human beings,” Carter said. “When you look at the definition of what a leader is, I would point directly to them. They do a really good job of helping teammates and keeping everyone motivated.”

The track and field team is currently preparing for their next meet at the 2025 NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championships in Virginia Beach, Virginia, beginning Friday, March 14.



Tarleton's wrestling team is heading to Nationals in their first year as a program.

Photo by: Coach Grant Leeth

# Tarleton wrestling team heads to nationals

**BY ANDREW UTTERBACK**  
*Podcast Producer*

Tarleton's wrestling team is headed to the National Collegiate Wrestling Championship their very first year competing.

This kind of immediate success is not something that first year sports programs often see, but head coach Grant Leeth said nationals was the goal from the very beginning.

"Right away, I knew with the talent that we brought in, [we] had high potential. My expectation from day one was we're gonna go be the best team in the country by the end of the year," Leeth said.

Tarleton's wrestling team is not as established as other universities' wrestling teams, but athletes and coaches were treated to a brand new wrestling facility.

"We have an amazing facility... It's one of the best wrestling facilities in the country," Leeth said.

Tarleton's wrestling team is undefeated in the National Collegiate Wrestling Association

(NCWA) and 3-1 in duels.

Leeth said the mindset of the team going into nationals is one of gratitude and optimism for the future of the program.

"We have an opportunity to be the first Division I wrestling program in Texas history...and we got a room full of guys that were willing to bet on themselves, bet on this brand new program and are hungry to make a name," Leeth said.

The support from Tarleton and the community as a whole hasn't been lost on the wrestling team.

"We're still focusing heavily on the gratitude piece — just being grateful for the opportunity to continue to wrestle, to get a college degree, to be around amazing kids, families and parents," Leeth said.

Despite this being their first finals appearance, the team is treating this just like any other match.

"Go in with an attitude of gratitude...but also go show the country what Texas wrestling is about and what this program's about," Leeth

said. "And that even as a first year program, you can come up and dominate and win when you're not supposed to. So we're gonna remain the same... It's still wrestling. It's still a seven minute match. We've been doing it all year, we're just in a different venue...Our expectation is to go win."

Tarleton wrestler Austin Tischer has been wrestling for 15 years and competes in the 285-lb weight class. He currently has a record of 14-3.

Tischer said that the goal of nationals was established at the very beginning of the season. After the initial month, the team started to see success and was fully confident about reaching the goal.

Tischer's season was not without hurdles. "I tore my MCL and caused a fracture in my femur at the knee joint," Tischer said. "I took about a month off, and it was difficult for me, mainly because I couldn't do the thing that I came here to do. I came here to get an education, and Tarleton's a great university, but the one thing that I love to do is wrestle, and

I had to sit on the sidelines and watch all my friends do that."

Tischer said he took the next month of physical therapy very seriously, working to rehab every day.

Wrestling is a sport that heavily relies on training, so his goal was to get back on the mat as soon as possible.

"You never see a wrestler rise to the occasion. What you see is them falling to their training," Tischer said. "If they're not training hard or they're not training as good as the other wrestler, they're most likely going to lose."

Tischer is optimistic about the team's chances in nationals and says that their ultimate goal for the next few years is going Division 1.

"We want to be the first Division I program in the state of Texas. In order to do that, we have to show up at nationals," Tischer said.

Leeth, Tischer and the team will compete in the NCWA nationals in Shreveport, Louisiana, from March 13-15.

# Back on Track:

## *Victoria Cameron's rehab journey...*

**BY ZOE LAM**  
*Contributing Writer*

When Victoria Cameron crosses the finish line, there is no hesitation. Just speed, power and the subtle confidence of an athlete who has fought for every stride.

A year ago, Cameron wasn't sure she'd ever compete again. Today, the local Tarleton standout is not just back to competing, but developing into a nationally ranked track athlete while also excelling on the soccer field as a Division I dual-sport athlete.

Cameron's journey isn't just about breaking records; it's about overcoming adversity.

Growing up in Stephenville, Texas, Cameron never shied away from competition. Whether she was sprinting down the track or flying past defenders on the soccer field, her athleticism was undeniable. From an early age, it was clear that she wasn't just talented, she was one in a million.

"I could see it in her from the beginning, her work ethic stood out to me and also her will to win," Tarleton's track and field head coach, Bobby Carter, said. "At the end of the day, my philosophy has always been to send you off better than when you came and to enjoy what you do. So, win in everything that you do. Tori does just that."

At Stephenville High School, Cameron racked up an impressive list of accomplishments: multiple district titles, state championship appearances and school records. College scouts took notice early and she soon found herself gaining offers from top programs for her speed. But for Cameron, choosing between soccer and track wasn't really in the cards.

"I actually didn't want to do both," she said. "I was already going to Tarleton for soccer. I was like, 'I'm not going to run track.' I hated track. Then a month before school started, I had a meeting with the track coach asking if I could run track, I couldn't let it go just yet."

With her sights set on competing at the highest level, Cameron committed to Tarleton State University, a Division I college that gave her the rare opportunity to compete in both sports. Everything seemed to be falling into place.

Then, in an instant, everything changed.

During a conference soccer match in September 2023, Cameron planted her foot and took a hit directly to the knee. Immense pain set in. She crumpled to the ground, clutching her leg, not knowing what was wrong.

"I had no idea," Cameron said. "I felt it pop, heard it pop even. It was awful. I just kept telling myself, 'There's no way.'"

The diagnosis was a torn ACL, a devastating injury for any athlete. But for someone whose entire life revolved around speed, agility and movement, it felt like the ultimate defeat.

For the first time in her life, Cameron was forced to slow down. Surgery was just the beginning. The demanding months of rehab tested her physically, mentally and emotionally.

"It was miserable," Cameron said. "The first month was the worst. I was so angry and in pain, but I knew it had to be done, I just kept pushing."

Cameron spent hours in physical therapy, relearning how to move and how to trust her knee again. Some days were hopeful, filled with progress and small victories. Others were brutal, defined by pain and frustration.

"I want to say my first three months were the worst," Cameron said. "The intensity of the exercises right out of surgery was what challenged my mind and body the most. However, I knew it was only a matter of time. I did end up going back and running in the conference championship meet five months after surgery. Which is nuts looking back at it now."

Rehab became her new competition. Every inch gained, bending her knee a little farther, walking without crutches, jogging for the first time; it all became a victory. Cameron attacked physical therapy with the same determination that makes her an elite athlete.

Cameron's support system was crucial. Her coaches reminded her of what she was capable of. Her trainers pushed her to trust the process. Her family and teammates never let her doubt that she would return.

Cameron never lost sight of her goal.

"Tori leads by example. She works so hard that if you are going against her, you want to do the same. Tori sets an example for the team

of what it's like to be mentally and physically tough," soccer teammate Isa Bergeron-Prejean said.

Five months later, Cameron stepped onto the track for the first time since her injury. It wasn't easy. Her legs felt different, her confidence wavered, but she kept pushing. And then, race by race, she started winning again. The comeback wasn't just about returning, it was about proving to herself and those around her that she was fully capable of pushing herself to be better than before.

"[Cameron] is just showing everyone that you can come back from anything and she's still here proving it to this day," track and field teammate Ca'terrin Cox said.

In her first full season back, Cameron didn't just regain her speed; she surpassed it. She began clocking times faster than ever before, dominating her events and climbing the national rankings. In the span of a few months, she went from a recovering athlete to one of the fastest sprinters in the world.

"She worked really hard to get back," coach Carter said. "Also, when I first got here, really sitting down and talking with her about how to fix the little things to do what's necessary to get better. She was always ready."

At the same time, Cameron was excelling on the soccer field, proving that her explosiveness and agility had returned just as strong. Balancing two sports at the Division I level is difficult enough, but doing it after a major injury? Unheard of. But for Cameron, there was never another option.

"I don't know if things will ever go back to normal in my knee," Cameron said. "But ever since I hit the one-year mark, I learned that this is going to be my new normal from now on and I have to embrace it going forward."

Life as a dual-sport athlete is relentless. Early mornings, late-night film sessions, endless travel; recovery is crucial and the margin for error is small. But Cameron thrives on the challenge.

"My schedule is crazy," Cameron said. "When we went to New Mexico, we lifted on a Thursday at 3 a.m. and went straight to the airport so everyone had three hours of sleep. Pretty much was just nonstop of being at a meet



Photo by: Zoe Lam

**Victoria Cameron warming up on Wisdom Gyms indoor turf.**

and you've got to constantly move your body and somehow make time for school."

Cameron's soccer training helps her maintain agility and endurance, while track keeps her speed at an elite level. Juggling both sports is tough, but she credits her efforts to her coaches and friends for keeping her on track.

"I just keep looking at scripture," Cameron said. "I changed my attitude about the injury and now it's go, go, go."

With a full season ahead, Cameron isn't slowing down anytime soon. She has her eyes set on conference titles, national championships and possibly even professional opportunities.

"The one thing I do want to do is try making the finals at nationals for both indoor and outdoor," Cameron said. "Right now, I'm ranked so high, my coach and I have been talking about the possibility if I continue to improve, I can make indoor worlds and do all that cool stuff."

Cameron's story is more than just a comeback, it's a testament to resilience, to refusing to let setbacks define you. For a small-town athlete who has already overcome the odds, the future is limitless.

"Honestly, I can see Tori running in the Olympics. Even a torn ACL couldn't stop her from running a time in the 60m that's second in the world," former soccer teammate Ashlyn Novotny said.

When she lines up at the starting blocks or steps onto the soccer field, she's not just competing, she's proving that champions are made in the moments no one sees.

And she's just getting started.



Bailey Small



Jordan Driver



Kaylie Garza

# The spring season for Tarleton college rodeo is officially underway

**BY MACKENZIE JOHNSON**

*Managing editor*

After nearly four months of swinging ropes in the practice pen with frozen fingers and keeping barrel horses in shape beneath many layers, the spring season of college rodeo for Tarleton athletes has made its anticipated return.

The Tarleton rodeo embroidered vests living in the closets of contestants have been collecting dust since Nov. 7-9 – the weekend Tarleton concluded their fall season of rodeoing in Vernon, Texas.

Now, as of Feb. 27-March 1 at Odessa College in Odessa, Texas, these famous purple vests have been busted out of dark closets and back into the bright lights of a college rodeo arena.

In the time between the ending of the fall season and the beginning of the spring, Tarleton rodeo members haven't slacked off in the slightest.

Jordan Driver is a Tarleton rodeo member who spends her off season still rodeoing, just not collegiately. Instead, she's consistently hitting the professional trail.

"I have been super blessed with, I believe, the best coaches, coaching staff and university in general for working with me while I am professional rodeoing," Driver said. "My school work is all online, and it helps make the education side of it all much easier. Everyone is just a phone call away when I have a question or need help with a class or anything. Tarleton truly has been the best at working with students to help them achieve their goals."

According to the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association's (PRCA) standings, as of Feb. 19, Driver sits in the 17 position in the world for barrel racing. In order to make the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo in December (the esteemed championship rodeo for the PRCA held in Las Vegas, Nevada), you must be top 15.

Alongside that professional rodeo standing, Driver also sits second in the barrel racing and first in the women's all-around standings for the Southwest Region of college rodeo. In order to make the College National Finals Rodeo held in Casper, Wyoming, in June, you must be sitting top three in your event for your region—which is based upon where the college you rodeo for is located on the map—when all points are tallied and

accounted for at the last rodeo of the year in the spring.

Landris White is yet another Tarleton rodeo member holding both a PRCA and a National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA) card.

"I am currently in the top 20 in the PRCA world standings and second in the Southwest Region (for steer wrestling)," White said. "In order to maintain that and rise in both standings, I plan to take it one steer at a time and do my job to the best of my ability. God already has a plan for me, I just need to do my part, and he'll take care of the rest."

Where you're ranked in the region at this midway point of the college rodeo season gives athletes a decent idea at the shot they have of making the CNFR. As a result, the remaining five rodeos of the spring can feel especially weighed down with higher stakes.

Before the recent first college rodeo of the spring semester in Odessa, Texas, Tori Brower was sitting second in the region standings for goat tying.

After winning the goat tying at Odessa, Brower then moved up to the first place position. However, she's not letting that


**Tori Brower**

pressure cloud her progress.

“You know, I used to be one that would get worried about the standings and points and all that, (and sometimes still do) but this year especially, I’ve been trying to just go and have fun and soak it all in,” Brower said. “It’s going by fast, which is sad, but it’s not over yet, and I’m still just focusing on enjoying it. God has a plan so I’m just going to trust in that, keep working hard and see what all I can accomplish.”

Brower has been to the CNFR twice already in her collegiate career, and ranked right there beside her in qualifications is Bailey Small. Currently, Small is tied for first in the saddle bronc for the Southwest Region, and he has his eyes set on a third CNFR qualification.

“Looking back on those two experiences, my favorite thing about making the CNFR was being with all my great teammates and family,” Small said. “The amount of great support and drive they all give is incredible. With all the support, our (men’s) team was able to become champions, and our women’s team reserve champions (at the last CNFR). I think we all hold one another to a standard.”

One of the great teammates Small receives this support from is none other than the Tarleton rodeo member ranked right there beside him in the standings, Coleman Shalbetter.

After securing the saddle bronc win at Odessa, Shalbetter moved from second in the region to being tied with Small for first – and although both roughstock riders want to be the one in the front seat heading to the finals this summer, the two celebrate each other’s individual successes.


**Landris White**

“I always have my sights set on winning, but it’s awesome to compete against my good buddies like Bailey Small that’s leading the region (with me) at the moment,” Shalbetter said. “I plan on doing my job and having fun but most importantly keeping a good attitude. That’s how I intend to secure my spot to the college finals.”

Freshman Waitley Sharon, sitting third in the saddle bronc, is another Tarleton rodeo member grounded in team success, and this focus on camaraderie may be the very edge that gets him to his first CNFR.

“Making the college finals would mean a lot, and I would be very honored to represent Tarleton,” Sharon said. “The team we have right now is awesome and pushes me to get better every week. (Head rodeo coach) Mark (Eakin) has helped me with my bronc riding so much and has given me so many opportunities.”

Early college rodeo success as a freshman must be a common trend this season as Kaylie Garza is also a Tarleton rookie sitting nicely going into the spring semester. Garza is positioned second in the women’s all-around behind Driver and third in the goat tying.

“I believe all of my success is due to a number of things,” Garza said. “Competing on big stages in high school definitely prepared me mentally and physically to be able to compete in college with these other incredible girls in this tough region. My coaches have been absolutely amazing as well, and I definitely also owe being able to practice with teammates to my success since they are more experienced and very tough to compete against. They push me to be better everyday.”


**Waitley Sharon**

Beyond Driver, White, Brower, Small, Shalbetter, Sharon and Garza, the remaining Tarleton athletes sitting top three in an event to make the CNFR at this midway point of the season are Roedy Farrell, sitting second in the bareback riding (propelled by his bareback riding win at Odessa); Tucker Carricato, sitting third in the bareback riding; Tayler Audrey, sitting second in the breakaway and Hadley Tidwell, sitting third in the barrel racing.

Tarleton rodeo’s men and women’s team are both ranked first in the Southwest Region looking ahead to the rest of the season, and the winners of the first spring rodeo at Odessa—Farrell in the bareback riding, Brower in the goat tying and Shalbetter in the saddle bronc riding—all played a large role in keeping Tarleton ahead in the ranks.

However, there’s still plenty of rodeo left. The season will forge ahead to Ranger College in Sweetwater, Texas, March 27-29; Western Texas College in Snyder, Texas, April 3-5; Howard College in Big Spring, Texas, April 10-12 and followed by the season finale at the Tarleton Stampede in Stephenville, Texas, April 24-26.

Although the season is not finished yet, and the contestants on the final’s bubble have several more weekends left to battle it out before spots are officially crowned, there’s a reason the Tarleton vest is so prevalent on the national stage of college rodeo – and based off the start of the spring season, the color purple may just shape up to shine several contestants brighter under the CNFR lights this June.

# Esports excellence:

## *Competitive teams continue to prove their skill in CECC*

BY COLTON BRADBERRY

Opinion Editor

Esports has been rapidly growing in collegiate athletics, and Tarleton's esports team is no exception.

Competing in games like "Overwatch 2," "Valorant" and "League of Legends," the team has been making waves, proving that competitive gaming is more than just a hobby; it's a serious sport.

Landon Thetford, president of the Texan Esports Club, emphasized the strong sense of community within the program.

"It's a tight-knit community, that's what I enjoy most about it," Thetford said.

Tarleton's esports team participates in the Collegiate Esports Commissioners Cup (CECC), one of the premier collegiate esports leagues, facing off against teams from universities across the country. The league provides a structured environment for collegiate esports programs, featuring intense competition in popular games.

The program went undefeated last season, securing championship titles in "Rocket League" (Division 5) and "Overwatch 2" at the conference level; a testament to their skill, teamwork and dedication.

"So far, all the teams are set to make the playoffs again. We have gone up one to two divisions per game. We've been slowly working our way up, and we have been winning a lot. Everyone has been improving, our ranks have been going up and we see better win percentages," Thetford said.

For fans eager to follow the action, Texan Esports streams its matches live on its YouTube channel, TexanEsport, providing a front-row seat to competitions.

With regular-season matchups, playoff contention and a shot at national recognition, CECC offers Tarleton's players an opportunity to showcase their skills on a major stage. Their participation in this league is a testament to the university's commitment to esports and its growth as a competitive program.

Despite their growing success, Thetford emphasized that Texan Esports remains a club open to all students.

"Don't be shy. Even if you don't play competitively, we still have a casual scene. Members play games over the weekends. We're trying to introduce more people who are on the casual side," Thetford said.

For students interested in joining Texan Esports, Thetford encourages them to stop by the gaming lounge on the bottom floor of the Student Center or connect with the club online.

"The best way to join the team is just coming and talking to us," Thetford said. "We [also] have a Discord; that's our main point of contact. You can find the link to our Discord on our Instagram."

With multiple teams competing across different titles, Tarleton's esports program is one of the most active in collegiate gaming. Each day of the week brings a different challenge as players gear up for intense competition:

### Monday – "Valorant"

"Valorant" is a tactical first-person shooter (FPS) game developed by Riot Games that combines precise gunplay with unique character abilities.

Each match features two teams of five players, alternating between attacking and defending bomb sites. Strategy is key, as players must coordinate their agent's abilities, ranging from healing and reconnaissance to deploying smokescreens and teleporting to outmaneuver their opponents.

Matches require quick reflexes, sharp communication and well-executed strategies to secure victory.

### Tuesday – "League of Legends"

"League of Legends" (LoL) is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game where two teams of five players battle to destroy the opposing team's Nexus (base) while defending their own.

Each player selects a champion, a character with unique abilities and roles, such as tanks, assassins, mages or marksmen. The game is a blend of strategy, teamwork and mechanical skill, requiring players to manage resources, control objectives and outmaneuver their enemies in intense team fights.

With over 160 champions to choose from, no two matches are ever the same, making adaptability and strategy crucial to success.



Photo by: Landon Thetford

The Texan Esports Rainbow Six Siege team celebrated a victory at the UT Tyler tournament.

### Wednesday – "Rainbow Six Siege"

"Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege" (Siege) is a tactical FPS game developed by Ubisoft that emphasizes teamwork, destructible environments and strategic planning.

The game is played in a 5v5 format, with one team attacking and the other defending an objective, such as a hostage, a bomb or an area that needs to be secured. Players select from a variety of operators, each with unique gadgets like drones, reinforced walls, breach charges and cameras.

Matches are often slow and methodical, requiring patience, precise communication and clever strategies to outsmart the opposing team. One wrong move can turn the tide of a match, making Siege one of the most high-stakes games in collegiate esports.

### Thursday – "Rocket League"

"Rocket League" is a high-octane hybrid of soccer and vehicular mayhem, where players control rocket-powered cars to hit a ball into the opposing team's goal.

Played in teams of three, "Rocket League" requires quick reflexes, aerial control and precise mechanics to execute impressive plays.

The game's physics-based gameplay rewards creativity and fast decision-making, as teams perform incredible aerial maneuvers, calculated passes and last-second saves to outscore their opponents.

### Friday – "Overwatch 2"

"Overwatch 2" is a fast-paced, team-based FPS game developed by Blizzard Entertainment, where players select from a diverse roster of heroes, each with unique abilities, roles and playstyles.

Teams of five players compete in various game modes, including escort missions, control point battles and hybrid maps that require dynamic strategy shifts.

The game is highly dependent on team coordination, ultimate ability usage and real-time adaptability as teams fight for objectives while countering their opponents' hero choices.

As the next season unfolds, Texan Esports is poised for even greater achievements, and their presence in CECC competition will only strengthen. With a dedicated team, a history of success and an ever-growing community of supporters, the future looks bright for Texan Esports.



Grayson Schirpik at a scrimmage earlier this season.

Photo courtesy: Tarleton Athletics

# Beach volleyball returns after successful first season

**BY DREW FLEMING**  
*Associate Producer*

This is beach volleyball's second season at Tarleton State University. For the last year and a half, the beach volleyball team has been working hard to make themselves a competitor in NCAA Division I. In 2025, the Texans travelled to Kingsville, Texas, to compete in the Javelina Beach Classic and Javelina Beach Showdown to start their season.

While competing at the Javelina Beach Classic, the Texans beat Texas Wesleyan 4-1, Wayland Baptist 5-0 and Mary Hardin-Baylor 4-1. The Texans also fell short to Texas A&M-Kingsville 1-4.

The following weekend, the team traveled back to Kingsville, Texas for the Javelina Beach Showdown. At the showdown, the Texans once again beat Wayland Baptist 5-0. They

also fell short to the University of Texas El Paso 1-4, Colorado Mesa 2-3 and Texas A&M-Kingsville 1-4. The Texans have this week off to practice and sharpen their skills on the sand before their next tournament, the Long Beach State University invitational.

Dayna Masters is the head volleyball coach at Tarleton. Masters received her bachelor's and master's degree from Tarleton and is excited to be coaching at her alma mater.

"At this point, everyone is our rival because we're the underdog. Being in a new program, there is a lot to work on. Really just keep our head down and work hard, and have the underdog mentality of, 'We're ready to battle anybody, we want to be the team everyone dreads playing,' because we're going to challenge them and be at our best," Masters said.

It's clear the Texans are determined to be the best they can be and grow as a team, both

on and off the court. They have proven their hard work and dedication through their exceptional performances at their tournaments so far and plan to work harder in their future on the sand at Tarleton.

Grayson Schirpik has been playing volleyball since she was 12 years old. She played indoors for a few years before returning to the sand at Tarleton.

"We are a new program, and it makes it seem like we are the underdogs and we have something to prove. We all have the experience, so going into those matches, it's not like we have something to prove; it's like, 'We can beat them'; it's a mindset of staying competitive," Schirpik said.

Although they are a newer program, like many Tarleton sports, they have the roster, talent and coaching to make it to the top of their division.

Allison Bryant started playing college volleyball at Catawba College in North Carolina and also played at Palm Beach State where she and her team won a national championship before coming to play at Tarleton.

"This is a great group to be around; it's like a family. We work with our partners and watch film to back each other up and prepare for competition," Bryant said.

Bryant and her partner Emma Halcomb are on a five-game win streak, with the team currently standing at a 4-4 record.

Bryant, Halcomb and the rest of the team will travel to Long Beach, California to compete against Long Beach State, Concordia, California State Bakersfield and Arizona next week. The rest of their season has them compete at the Islander Classic in Corpus Christi, Texas and the New Orleans Classic in New Orleans, Louisiana.

# Eight different nations, one perfect match

BY BROOKLYN MCKINNEY

*Multimedia Journalist*

The Tarleton Women's Tennis roster is comprised of natives from eight different nations across the world. While every player has their roots in different cultures and customs, they all share a common experience weaving them together as international student athletes.

While it may not be as commonplace for an American college basketball or football team to recruit mostly international players, tennis is more of an individual sport that is ranked on a more national scale.

Due to that individual basis, Tarleton's women's head tennis coach, Elliane Douglas-Miron, is in the position to welcome several international students to the state of Texas.

"They send in their recruiting videos to me or to my assistant, and then we'll kind of watch them play, we'll look at their results and we'll see if we think they're a good fit for our program," Douglas-Miron said. "We also have recruiters who help international students get to the U.S. and so, I have a lot of contacts internationally with those people who are always looking to send their student athletes to the U.S."

Just one of these exceptional players who made the cut is Maretha Burger, a senior kinesiology major from South Africa.

"There's a lot of things that your parents need to sacrifice from a very young age to be able to be set up in a way that actually kept me here, not just tennis-wise," Burger said. "Financial-wise, social-wise, maturity, so many things. You have to see your friends do their normal things and you need to go back, put on your tennis shoes and go play. It's missing classes, weeks of classes, just because you're trying to get a good enough ranking or NTR (National Tennis Ranking) so that coaches can see you and so that you can get offers."

These women would sleep, eat and breathe tennis from the time they were young just for a shot to be here playing for a collegiate team. Now they have made those dreams a reality.

Noelia Lorca, a senior psychology major from Spain, is a Tarleton tennis athlete whose arrival in America changed the experience of the sport for her.

"After I came here to America was when I really started to enjoy tennis," Lorca said. "I think that tennis in America, like college tennis



Photo courtesy of Tarleton Athletics.

## Ximena Morales and Duru Kescu during their doubleheader match against Collin College Jan. 25.

in general, is just so much different than what we were doing back in our countries. Like, in our country, you were just playing for yourself. I think the team part just made it so much better. You have the team, and because tennis is an individual sport, usually I feel like it can be very hard on you. But coming here, it's made it a new experience."

The team has supported and uplifted each other through their ups and downs as international student athletes, creating one perfect match. Clara Sobius, a sports management major from Canada, recognizes how these varying backgrounds strengthens their team relationship.

"I feel like we all bring different values, and we're all united in a way because we all learned about each other, and we all got so close," Sobius said.

Before the team got acquainted with each other and the state of Texas, Douglas-Miron welcomed them with open arms. She remembers her experience coming from Canada to the U.S. to play college tennis all

too well, and she strives to offer her players the love and support they need to grow and connect with their newfound community.

"It's just making sure that they feel safe, first and foremost — that they feel like it's an open environment where they can share their concerns. They don't have a mom and dad here, right? So, making sure that they know that they have either me or a lot of other people in the department that they can reach out to if they have any issues (is important), and I think that sets a really nice base for us to be able to talk about tennis and winning and trying to do those things," Douglas-Miron said.

Not only have they grown accustomed to each other, but also to the southern hospitality of Texans.

This culture shift has greatly impacted Sobius and the way she interacts with people day-to-day.

"Sometimes I'm in the airport in Texas, and people come up to me and ask, 'What school do you go to?' Or, like, they see rackets and they're like, 'Oh, you play tennis!' It's nice because it

made me more social," Sobius said. "Before, I was so scared to talk to people I didn't know, and I feel people are more rude in Canada. Here, people are so nice. Like, 'Oh, have a good day!' Things like that. People don't say that at home."

Many players on the women's tennis team at Tarleton have also grown to enjoy the warmer weather and proximity to the bustling city life, Lorca being one of them.

"I really like it because, at least here, you can go to at least two or three cities in one weekend, and you're going to have fun, you know? There are a lot of things to do in every single city," Lorca said.

Their goals remain the same every year: To dominate on the tennis court and crush their competition.

"We lost against GCU (Grand Canyon University) in the final tournaments and conference tournament the last two years, so we need some revenge," Burger said.

Of course, Douglas-Miron's confidence and optimism remain unmatched.

# Rogelio Chavez: *Tarleton's Men's Club Soccer Winger/Striker*

BY ANNABETH JOHNSON

Multimedia Journalist

With the warmer weather and clearer skies of spring comes new outdoor activities to support and be involved in at Tarleton State University.

Sophomore Rogelio Chavez became involved in these activities and has been an athlete on the Tarleton Men's Club Soccer team since his freshman year.

Chavez's position on the Men's Club Soccer team switches between being a winger and a striker.

The job of a striker is to score and lead the offensive line for the team.

When playing position as a winger, Chavez's job as an attacker is to run and remain on the left or right side of the field to open spaces for the team to score.

Chavez's talent and love for soccer was not discovered in college but first began at the age of seven and influenced by his father.

His father played semi-professional soccer in Mexico and put Chavez on a soccer team at a young age.

As the years progressed, soccer switched from just a sport to something Chavez truly loved doing.

"I play soccer because it is a stress reliever for me," Chavez said. "I forget about everything else, and it gives me joy and keeps me fit."

While gaining experience and improving upon his skills, Chavez explained the challenges of playing the sport.

"I am usually always tired because it is a lot of practice and games," Chavez said. "Your schedule is always busy. I am always just tired and sore, but it is very worth it."

Although soccer has some challenges, from always keeping your schedule full to the strain it can put on your body, the positives of playing the sport outweigh the negatives.

"My favorite part of playing soccer is being able to show off what I have — my skill," Chavez said. "Just being able to have fun while also working out. It's also competitive, and I am a very competitive person. It gives me motivation to just do more, get better."

As well as playing soccer, Chavez is a Tarleton student majoring in kinesiology.

Chavez's academic concentration is focused on occupational therapy, which he plans to pursue after college.

Chavez has been balancing soccer and his classes for so long that it now feels like second nature.

The Men's Club Soccer team has two practices a day, and Chavez studies in between that time and after practice in order to maintain his high grades and stay on top of his academics.

Chavez extends some advice to those who are considering getting into the sport or just looking to improve their skills.

"Soccer is one of the most difficult sports to get good at because not everyone is good with their feet," Chavez said. "You definitely have to have a lot of stamina, be quick and be good with your feet. You have to be consistent and give it your full effort in order to get better, and that's really for anything."

The men's soccer club started off the season with a 1-1 tie against Baylor University at their last game.



Chavez and the Men's Club Soccer have their next game at Trinity University on March 22 at 3 p.m., so make sure to get out and go support your Tarleton Texans.



Photo by: Andrew Loewe

Chavez runs the field during a game, adorned by a golden sunset.



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