

On Women's Athletics at Clemson: University Sports Culture Needs to (Re)Evolve

By Bryan Denham

"Clemson Investing in Athletics More than Ever"

That headline, which accompanied an April 20, 2016 article in *USA Today*,¹ certainly reflects the commitment Clemson has made to building a national-caliber football program and to renovating athletic facilities on campus. Littlejohn Coliseum is nearly complete, and the university is constructing a \$55 million football complex. The football facility will surely rival, if not surpass, others across the country, not unlike the team itself. Earlier this year, the Tigers played for the national championship, losing a close game to the University of Alabama.

As it happens, a top female golfer at Clemson recently transferred to the University of Alabama after just one season with the Tigers. As a freshman she had become the first female at Clemson to qualify for the NCAA Women's Golf Championships, and her exit from the team marked the fourth early departure in three years. Those who follow women's sports at CU may have experienced what the late Yogi Berra described as "déjà vu all over again."

In 2007 the Clemson women's soccer team participated in its fourteenth consecutive NCAA post-season tournament. Formed in 1994, the team had reached the post-season every year it had competed. Then came a coaching change followed by a mass exodus of female soccer players – not because of the change, per se, but because of a dysfunctional situation that followed and festered. Looking at Figure 1 below, the team managed to win just one ACC match in 2008, and it would not win another until 2012. Across five seasons, the team went 2-47-1 in the ACC. While the current coach has done an excellent job reviving a program left to wither on the Riggs field vine, he should never have faced such a challenge in the first place. Hopefully, the women's golf program will overcome recent losses in personnel and compete successfully in the season ahead.

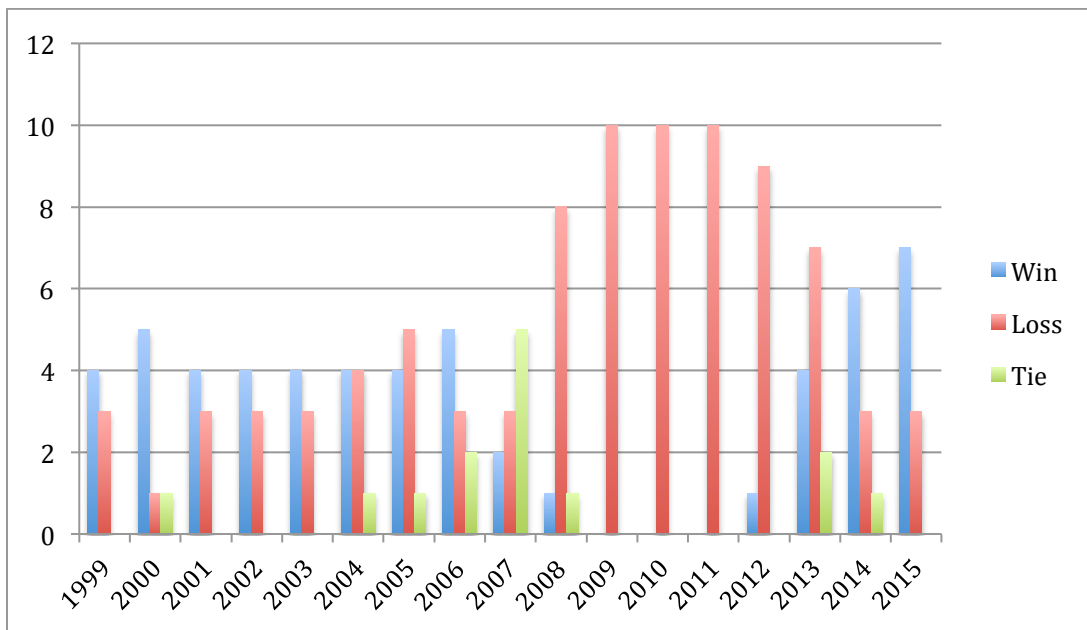


Figure 1. ACC Win-Loss-Tie Records for Clemson Women's Soccer Teams, 1999-2015

As the Clemson women’s soccer and golf teams continue to rebuild, the women’s basketball program continues to struggle for both wins and fans. As Figure 2 shows, since its last winning conference season, in 2001, the team has compiled an ACC record of 45-167, including a recent two-year record of 1-31. Last year the CU volleyball team, which has had some great seasons, also struggled, finishing the ACC at 1-19.

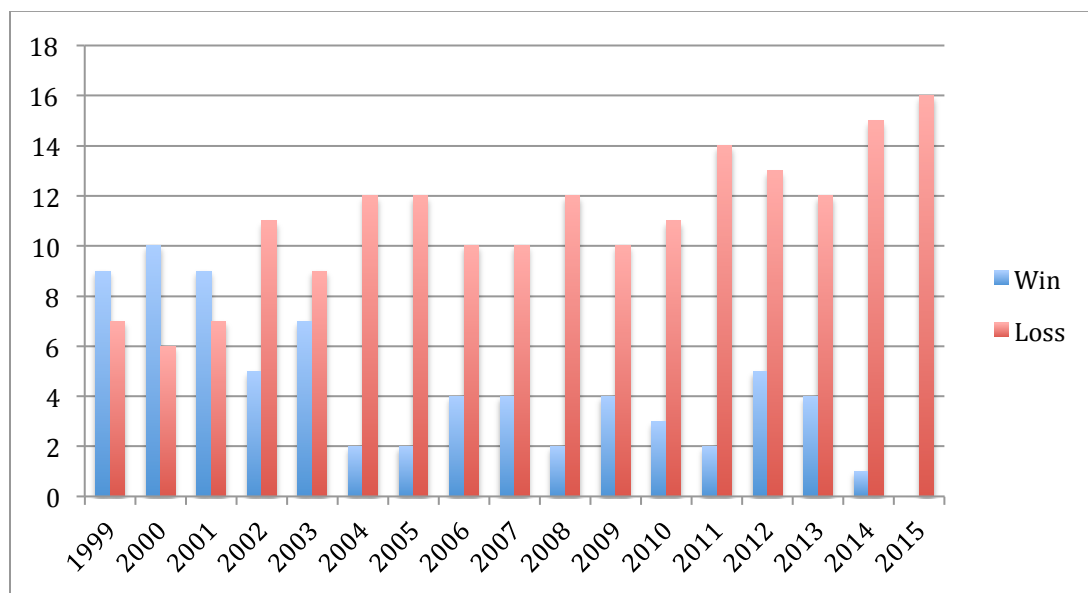


Figure 2. ACC Win-Loss Records for Clemson Women’s Basketball Teams, 1999-2015

Recent struggles in the women’s sports are not the fault of any one person, or any team of persons, but are the result of a somewhat shortsighted view of university athletics. At the moment, a disproportionate focus on the CU football team has created a kind of zero-sum thinking, where other sports are seen as a trivial or as a threat to resources. Success in one sport, however, does not call for an expectation of failure in others, especially when other programs were once quite successful.

Indeed, at a university that “sells itself” to football recruits, the athletic department should be able to develop similar recruiting successes for its women’s athletic programs. In some cases, it already has. As Figure 3 illustrates, the CU women’s tennis team has been able to achieve success, advancing in the NCAA tournament numerous times and establishing itself as an ACC leader. Female track athletes have also excelled at Clemson, with three former track stars qualifying for the 2016 Rio Olympics; hurdler Brianna Rollins won a gold medal. Additionally, in the classroom, the women’s diving team boasts some of the highest collective grade point averages on campus, and other programs have shared similar successes.² But successes have seemingly become the exception, not the rule.

Accordingly, the time has come for the athletic department to ask itself some tough questions: What, fundamentally, is holding back women’s athletics at Clemson? Why is that the case, and what would it take for the problem to be corrected (i.e., to develop each program to the point at which it can compete with any team in the ACC)? For starters, the general athletic culture and the assumptions individuals make about athletic success need to move beyond men’s sports. As an example, a recent headline on Tigernet.com stated: “Clemson ranked in Top 5 in Capital One Cup Final Standings.”³ While men’s athletics did finish in the Top 5 this past year – the football and soccer teams, in particular, had great seasons in 2015-2016 – women’s athletics was not ranked in the top 88, meaning it was not ranked at all.⁴ Clemson finished at number 42, not number 5.

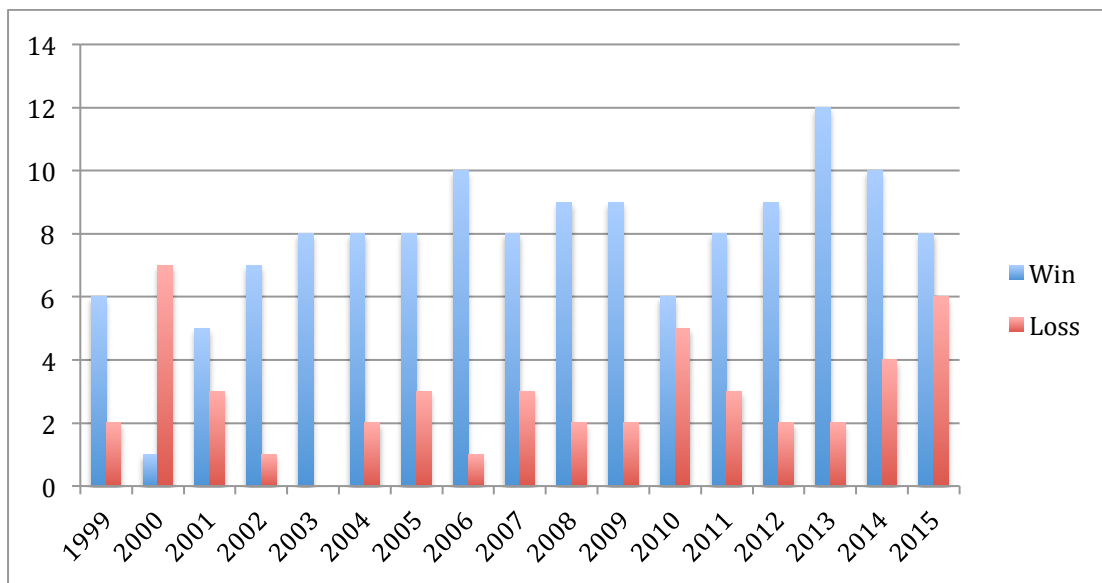


Figure 3. ACC Win-Loss records for Clemson Women’s Tennis Teams, 1999-2015

As Clemson continues to pursue “top 20” status as a public university, the administration may want to consider women’s athletic programs at other leading universities. The programs are among the very best in the United States, largely because the universities have made a commitment to campus-wide excellence. Here are the top finishers in women’s athletics in the recent Capital One standings:

1. Southern California
2. Stanford
3. Penn State
4. North Carolina
4. Oklahoma
4. Syracuse
7. Nebraska
8. Connecticut
9. Texas
10. Florida State
11. Florida
12. Georgia
13. Duke
14. California
14. Oregon
14. Washington

Some of the schools listed above are larger than Clemson and offer more sports, but four of the schools compete in the ACC: North Carolina, Syracuse, Florida State and Duke. Given the presence of those schools at the top, why should Clemson be ranked at the bottom?

Below, in no particular order, are some of the reasons why the university should reassess and work to develop its women’s athletic programs to the extent it works to develop its men’s athletic programs.

- University media representations. As the ACC Network Extra begins streaming athletic contests this fall,⁵ CU will need to move beyond success in a limited number of sports if it seeks to keep up with the televised competition in both men’s and women’s athletics.

- University reputation. Having athletes leave a university disillusioned takes a toll on reputation, especially among legacy students. Some of the athletes who departed recently had followed Clemson athletics since childhood, and they now may look elsewhere in adulthood.
- Quality students. In my experience, female athletes have been some of the strongest students at Clemson. They understand commitment, discipline and time management, and many participate the most in class discussions.
- Title IX requirements. Investing in women's athletics keeps the university in good standing with participation expectations.
- Recruitment of quality faculty and staff. Many female (and male) job applicants at Clemson have attended universities with strong women's athletic programs. Athletics at these schools symbolize universities that strive for excellence across campus and are not satisfied with stellar performance by a limited number of teams. In other words, they walk the walk.
- Sport spectatorship. Students, faculty, staff and others in the community are more likely attend athletic events when they anticipate competitive matches.

For those reasons and others, the university needs to support *all* athletic programs on campus. It will take a concerted effort, but overall success is achievable. As an Olympics headline in the *Los Angeles Times* recently noted,⁶ "American women are dominating the Games, and it didn't happen by accident."

Bryan Denham is Campbell Professor of Sports Communication in the Department of Communication.

Notes

¹ Article available at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaaf/acc/2016/04/20/clemson-investing-athletics-more-than-ever/83284308/>

² See http://www.clemson.com/ViewArticle.dbml?SPSID=671138&SPID=110900&DB_LANG=C&DB_OEM_ID=28500&ATCLID=211020805

³ The Capital One Cup ranks universities based on the performance of all sports programs, offering a breakdown for both men's and women's teams. For more on Clemson's performance in that ranking, see <http://www.tigernet.com/update/player/Clemson-ranked-Top-5-Capital-One-Cup-Final-Standings-23490?ref=front>.

⁴ See <http://www.capitalonecup.com/docs/complete-capital-one-cup-standings.pdf>

⁵ See <http://www.theacc.com/news/acc-network-extra-launches-fall-olympic-sports-coverage-08-18-2016>

⁶ See <http://www.latimes.com/sports/la-sp-oly-women-plaschke-20160816-snap-story.html>