

# Miami Herald

## St. Thomas University plays a full schedule while Nova, Barry struggle to get on the field

BY WALTER VILLA MIAMI HERALD WRITER

MARCH 22, 2021 03:48 PM



St. Thomas University baseball coach Jorge Perez. ST. THOMAS UNIVERSITY

St. Thomas University, which competes in the NAIA, has played 28 baseball games.

By contrast, other local baseball teams like Nova Southeastern University and Barry University have struggled to play due to different COVID-19 protocols required on the NCAA Division II level.

NSU has played just three games (0-3) and didn't get its first game finished until March 12 — more than one month after STU's Feb. 4 opening day.

Laz Gutierrez, who left a job with the Boston Red Sox as their mental skills coordinator at the major-league level, has been able to coach NSU for just 14 games, including 11 in his first year with the school in 2020 before the pandemic halted action.

Barry has played seven games (4-3) this season, including a pair of doubleheaders during the past nine days.

STU president David A. Armstrong said the NAIA has allowed their institutions “the flexibility to address their protocols in a way that gave their students the best opportunity” to enjoy the full college experience.

“The NCAA’s protocols are so restrictive that it’s hard for Division II or Division III programs to afford all the testing,” Armstrong told the Herald. “In addition, when the NCAA canceled all fall sports for D2 and D3 institutions, that made it even tougher to comply due to the increased demand for facilities in the spring.

“In the NAIA, we felt that by keeping the three seasons [fall, winter, spring] separate, that would give our students the best chance.”

NSU officials declined comment through its media relations spokesman.

Barry University president Dr. Mike Allen issued a statement that read, in part:

“It has been our goal throughout the pandemic to provide our students with as full of an experience as possible, while adhering to all relative health and safety protocols.

“We are pleased that our student-athletes are competing with these safety measures fully in place.”

Meanwhile, Armstrong praised athletic director Bill Rychel and associate vice president for student life Matt Roche for setting up proper protocols. Armstrong also credited the students and coaches for following those protocols.

“It was key that our students showed a willingness not to go out all night and instead follow the guidelines,” Armstrong said. “We also put in curfews for students who live off campus.”

The Sun Conference, which includes STU, was one of just two NAIA leagues that completed the fall seasons with championship tournaments, Armstrong said.

In addition, STU has increased its percentage of students doing on-campus learning from 60 percent in the fall to 80 percent now.

“I couldn’t be prouder of our students, coaches and compliance people,” Armstrong said. “We followed the facts and the science and not the politics.”

STU’s baseball team is 19-9 this season and ranked 12<sup>th</sup> in the nation. The program’s coach, Jorge Perez, who became STU’s wins leader on Saturday with victory No. 452, said he’s just happy to be playing after the pandemic forced a premature end to the 2020 season.

“I’m thrilled we’re able to play a full season not only in baseball but all our sports,” said Perez, who led STU to second place nationally in 2015 and 2019.

“It’s unfortunate NSU and Barry can’t play as much. They have full rosters with some players who want to be able to impress pro scouts.”