

Episode 10: Brad Jorgensen, Head Coach of the Saint Leo Men's Lacrosse Team

Speaker 1:

St Leo 360, a 360-degree overview of the Saint Leo University community.

Greg Lindberg:

Welcome to another edition of the Saint Leo 360 Podcast. My name is Greg Lindberg. And on this particular episode, I'm pleased to be joined by a guest star from athletics. His name is Brad Jorgensen and he is our head coach of the men's lacrosse team here at Saint Leo University. Brad, thank you so much for joining us.

Brad Jorgensen:

Absolutely. Thanks for having me. I look forward to it.

Greg Lindberg:

Definitely. This is going to be fun. So first off, I do want to just get into your background a little bit and then talk about how you came to Saint Leo, and I know you've been here quite a while now.

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure.

Greg Lindberg:

So we definitely have a lot to chat it out as far as your time here. So first of all, Brad, talk to me about where you grew up and where you're actually from and all that good stuff.

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. I grew up in a town called the Simsbury, Connecticut. It's north of Hartford by about 20 minutes, almost to the Massachusetts border. Spent most of my life in Northern Connecticut and Western Massachusetts before heading out to the Boston area after a couple of years as an assistant coach in Western Massachusetts. And from Eastern Massachusetts in the Boston area, I headed on down here. So, I stopped heading north and east and headed down south.

Greg Lindberg:

Right, to a warmer climate-

Brad Jorgensen:

No doubt.

Greg Lindberg:

... and more sunshine and all that good stuff. So then as far as sports go, I'm curious, when did you start getting interested in sports, playing sports?

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. When I was about four years old, my father went to a Hartford whalers hockey game when they were in the NHL.

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Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Brad Jorgensen:

And he decided he wanted me to be a professional hockey player when I was about four. So next thing, I'm on skates, registered for the youth hockey program and kind of grew up playing hockey. And then when I was in about six or seventh grade, a guy who had just opened up a retail sporting goods store came by the hockey rink and started asking guys to play lacrosse because he sold lacrosse equipment. And it kind of became the thing for us hockey guys to do in the spring once all the ice melted. So, probably started playing, I want to say about sixth grade. It was the old days where you still played three sports in high school.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Brad Jorgensen:

So I played football in the fall, hockey in the winter, lacrosse in the spring, and just turned out that the one I was the best at happened to be lacrosse.

Greg Lindberg:

Uh-huh (affirmative). And did you kind of realized from an early age that that was something you wanted to do and were really passionate about lacrosse specifically?

Brad Jorgensen:

No, I think I was more passionate about sports in general. And you go to the meetings with your guidance counselor when you're in high school and you're obviously not going pro in any of these sports, but you really love them. So you start trying to figure out how am I going to be able to make a career someday out of these things that I love. So, between that desire and some experience that I had had helping out a friend of mine's mother who was an elementary school teacher, I decided I was going to be a high school phys ed teacher. And I think at that time in my life, my favorite sport was football. So I wanted to teach PE, be a high school football coach, and that was going to be my path to be able to continue in sports without being good enough to make a living plan.

Greg Lindberg:

Oh, I see. Interesting. And let's talk a little bit about your educational background. Where did you actually go to college and what did you study?

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. I went to a school called Springfield College in Western Massachusetts, actually the birthplace of basketball.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow!

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Brad Jorgensen:

We like to call ourselves the Harvard of phys ed. If you are interested in strength and conditioning, physical education, athletic training, any of those sort of fields, Springfield is kind of the place to go. Like I said, basketball was invented on campus as was volleyball. It really sort of attracts those type of areas of study. It actually started as a YMCA Training School, was the origin of the college. So being that I wanted to teach phys ed and having such a good phys ed school, probably 35 minutes from where I grew up, it was kind of a layup.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. Interesting. And then, so I assume you did spend several years of career actually as a phys ed teacher?

Brad Jorgensen:

Actually, I didn't, when I first graduated college, I spent a semester teaching high school English actually-

Greg Lindberg:

Oh, wow!

Brad Jorgensen:

... at Northwest Catholic in West Hartford, Connecticut. Taught Macbeth to high school seniors for a semester. That was one of those where I showed up to be a substitute teacher and it turned out the teacher I was subbing for never came back. So I kind of inherited her class.

Greg Lindberg:

Gotcha. Yeah.

Brad Jorgensen:

And then that spring, I started as an assistant lacrosse coach at Amherst College. So really I haven't done too much else professionally other than coaching college lacrosse.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow. So you really did start specifically with lacrosse then-

Brad Jorgensen:

Yes.

Greg Lindberg:

... as far as your coaching career? Interesting. And so talk to me about kind of your early coaching career and then your path to actually coming here to Saint Leo.

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. During my time, my first assistant coaching job was at a small private school in Western Massachusetts, Amherst College. And Amherst College is in a conference at the division three level that doesn't allow off-season practice. So pretty much everybody had to coach multiple sports, because a lot

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of our players were multiple sport athletes, because there really was no off-season practicing. So I spent that first semester teaching English because I didn't have anybody to coach and then sort of rolled in to being an assistant coach at Amherst for two seasons. At the end of those two seasons, I had the opportunity to become a head coach at a pretty young age. I was 23, but had the opportunity to go to Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, which is sort of halfway in-between Boston and Cape Cod and ended up staying there for seven years as the head coach at the division three level.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Brad Jorgensen:

And then one day, I sort of came across a job posting that, "Hey, the school in Florida is looking to start a college lacrosse program." I wrote Coach Reedy an actual letter in those days to express my interest in the job and didn't hear much for a while and then got an email a couple months later, sort of Coach Reedy asking me if I still had interest in finding out more about the job and kind of took off from there.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow. Very interesting. And then, so I know, like you mentioned, this was a brand new program, a brand new sport here at Saint Leo when you arrived on campus. Talk to me about what that was like? I can imagine it was pretty exciting, just kind of being the first coach for a new program here.

Brad Jorgensen:

Yeah. It was interesting and it was one of the appeals. Not having to try to change a culture, not trying to have to fix someone else's mistakes, for lack of a better way of saying it.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Brad Jorgensen:

It was certainly appealing. It was sort of daring at the time. There was no NCAA lacrosse at any level in the state of Florida when we started. We are the first college lacrosse program in the state.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Brad Jorgensen:

At the time that we started, our nearest opponent was in South Carolina. So we had some interesting times early on. I think at the time, a lot of people thought we were crazy. I think we're happy that over the long haul, we look a lot less crazy, but it was certainly interesting trying to recruit to a school that had never had a game played on its campus really, and was really new for just about anybody within about a 10-hour radius.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow. Yeah. And could you talk a little bit about the first few years, those teams, how they did and kind of how you started building things?

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Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. Early on, we didn't have a whole lot of time to get things up and running. I started in February with the intention of having a team on the field by September. So we had defined 30 plus college lacrosse players-

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Brad Jorgensen:

... recruit them and enroll them and get them here in relatively short order. I think there was a big appeal for a lot of the guys to be able to start and build something. Early on, we took our lumps the first year or two. We were not necessarily nationally known quite yet. And a lot of times you've got to have some marquee wins before people start paying attention and you stop being a cute little story down south.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Brad Jorgensen:

So early on, we had some guys that... I tell you what, those are some of my favorite years. We might not have been very good, but our guys showed up every day wanting to get better. They had no expectations other than I was going to give them my best and they were going to give me theirs. It was a lot of fun to do that. And then we were fortunate a couple of years and started getting some wins that really mattered. A couple of nationally-ranked wins, a couple of years in, we were fortunate enough to make it to our conference finals. The year after that, we ended up winning the conference tournament. So, the build happened relatively quickly after we soldiered through the first couple of years.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. Right. And let's fast forward a little more-

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure.

Greg Lindberg:

... to today and say the last few years with Saint Leo being in the Sunshine State Conference. Talk about the strength of lacrosse specifically in that conference, and then if you could speak to just in general, the strength of the conference across all sports.

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. No, I think I'll start with that piece. The Sunshine State Conference is known nationally in just about every sport in being the premier division two conference out there in terms of the quality of the teams that are in it. I think in terms of the fact that the best or the worst and everybody in-between are all really, really good. There is no true bottom of the conference in just about any sport and the same holds true in men's lacrosse. You're talking about a conference that has eight members that sponsor men's lacrosse. And usually you'll find five to six of us in the top 15 in the country nationally.

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Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Brad Jorgensen:

There really is no day off once we start conference play. There really is no sort of perennial basement. It's super competitive day in and day out. I can't remember the last time our conference tournament wasn't chosen via tiebreaker. It is a tight, tough conference with a lot of really good lacrosse being played.

Greg Lindberg:

Very cool. And then I know back in 2018, the men's lacrosse team had quite a run. If you could talk about that and kind of take us through that journey?

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. Now, 2018 was obviously a really special year. We had obviously a very talented team, a very senior heavy team, and quite frankly, one that had underachieved the year prior. And one of the things that we were able to do is really get full commitment from that senior class that trickled down to everybody else and really led us to go on a run that led all the way to the national championship game. Along the way, we had, I believe five one goal wins if not six over the course of that run. And that speaks to the discipline and the hard work that that senior class put in to make sure we didn't underachieve in 2018. But I distinctly remember speaking to the team after we clinched the conference championship and reminding them that that team was almost the exact same team that the year before didn't even make the conference tournament.

Greg Lindberg:

Uh-huh (affirmative). Interesting.

Brad Jorgensen:

So it was a special group, it was a talented group. We got hot at the right time and really found a way to win a bunch of tight ones that really could have gotten in the way.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. Wow. Very cool. And as far as the national championship game, I'm very curious about that whole experience.

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. It's an absolute mind-blowing experience. And I think if I could do one thing again, I tried to normalize it for our guys. And I think that was a mistake. I should've told them what an absolute circus it was going to be. You go from playing the national semi-final game in Hickory, North Carolina in front of 2,500 people to five days later, you're doing a walkthrough in Foxborough and game day, you're walking out in front of 35,000 people to play a game.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

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Brad Jorgensen:

It is a unique experience. The NCAA has us do an autograph session. I'm pretty sure it's the first time any of my guys have ever signed an autograph.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Brad Jorgensen:

The whole experience is wonderful, but it is completely extraordinary for your average day-to-day experience of a division two lacrosse player. And I really do think that was one of the major hurdles. And one of the reasons we didn't play as well as we wanted to in that game was... It was an overwhelming experience. It's tough to prepare guys for who have never been in a stadium like that to go out and play in that atmosphere.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. And just the whole environment, like you said, Foxboro, Gillette Stadium, home of the Patriots. You think of all the success just on that field in general-

Brad Jorgensen:

Absolutely.

Greg Lindberg:

... and then I also think of your background, kind of your neck of the woods. So I would imagine it was pretty special just location-wise for you too.

Brad Jorgensen:

Absolutely. We actually went and did one of our practices once we got up there at Wheaton College where I used to work.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Brad Jorgensen:

You're kind of on your own a little bit to figure out practice opportunities if you don't like the times they give you. Luckily, I obviously had some connections up there and knew some folks. So we were able to do that and to go back and be driving past the house that I lived in when my first child was born and those types of things as part of the process, it was really cool and really special.

Greg Lindberg:

Very nice. Yeah. Let's talk a little bit about your role as a head coach. And talk to me about, what do you look for when you're recruiting a lacrosse player? What kind of characteristics do you specifically look for?

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Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. I'm always a big believer in looking and seeking out the things that we can't teach them. My job as a coach is to make them better at playing lacrosse-

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Brad Jorgensen:

... but I can't coach somebody into being six foot four. I can't coach somebody into being fast. I can't really coach anybody into being tough mentally and physically. Those are attributes that are... They are what they are when they get here. So those things that I can't improve upon are things we like to seek out in the recruiting process. Fast is always first. Big is nice, but big and slow doesn't help me. Speed, it really is a speed game. So, we're looking for speed. And really, we're looking for some of those other intangibles. It's really easy for me to watch someone play for a couple of minutes and decide whether or not they're good enough. The question is, do I want them representing our program? Do I want them wearing a Saint Leo lacrosse T-shirt when they're in the dorm on a Saturday night?

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Brad Jorgensen:

Are they the type of people that we want associated with us and that I want here when I'm not around? And that's probably the hardest part of the process is figuring those pieces out.

Greg Lindberg:

That's interesting insight. And then when you are recruiting, what do you tell potential recruits, potential players here Saint Leo? What are kind of the big selling points that you tell them as far as why they should play here?

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. I think we really... When we start the communication with kids we're interested in, our first step is having them understand what Saint Leo is. What we are, who we are, how we operate isn't for everybody. And there's people who don't want to operate the way that we operate and don't want to live by the core values and that doesn't interest them for their college experience. We want to weed that out real quickly. We want people who are the correct fit for Saint Leo. So really, when the recruiting conversation starts, it's less of a sell and more of an education. And hopefully during that education, we find good players who want to be here and want to operate the way that we operate and want to work as hard as we're going to work. So that's the important part for us, really more than the sell. When it gets to the point of the sell, it becomes pretty easy. If we get you to campus and you meet the people here and you see the facilities here, you find out really quickly that it's an excellent place to be.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah, very well said. Now, what kind of advice would you give, let's say there is a high school lacrosse player or someone who has lacrosse experience listening out there, potentially interested in playing at the college level, what kind of advice would you give to that individual?

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Brad Jorgensen:

Yeah. I always, when I have the opportunity to talk to high schools or talk to camps about this subject, I think the first thing that I try to get across is how important the academic piece is. I always tell guys, if they want a scholarship, they should go to the library, not the weight room. There's way more money out there for smart kids than there are for kids who can play lacrosse.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Brad Jorgensen:

So, I've met a lot of really, really good lacrosse players who are good human beings, who we couldn't recruit because their grades held them back. And I try to get across to kids to make sure that they're not closing doors, that they're opening them. I would say the other important piece is for those guys to be cognizant of how they interact with their parents and other people. We're making judgements on that as coaches. Again, the whether or not they can play part is really easy for us to evaluate. And it's kind of a you can, or you can't type of situation. But I don't want to recruit somebody who's kind of snippy with his mom when I call the house. I don't want to recruit somebody who's rolling his eyes at his dad when his dad asks a question on the recruiting visit. That's just not the type of people I want as part of our group.

Brad Jorgensen:

So people just need to be aware of what they're putting out there. Again, if I invite you to campus, I've seen you play and you're good enough to play, but be aware of those other things. I would say just generally lacrosse advice, we tend to want to fast forward these days and go from starting lacrosse to being the best kid on our team. Folks need to embrace the middle a little bit and need to embrace learning the fundamental pieces of the game.

Greg Lindberg:

Oh, I see. And I know you kind of touched on it, but let's delve into a little more about balancing academics and athletics for a student athlete. Based on your your experience as a head coach and having dealt with a lot of student athletes, what are some tips you might have or strategies that you think work well for striking that good balance?

Brad Jorgensen:

Yeah, absolutely. Again, I've been doing it here long enough to know sort of what works. Our team's academic rules are very simple and are boiled down to a couple of points. If you go to class, you sit in the front row, you raise your hand once a day, you turn in your work and you let your coach know if you're struggling. If you do those five things, you're going to be just fine. The difference in college isn't level of content, it's how it's presented. In high school, kids get given 10 math problems on Monday and they're due Tuesday. You either did them, or you didn't, they're either right or they're wrong. College, you get assigned a paper in September that's due in November, and it's sort of up to you to manage your time accordingly to make sure it gets done well.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

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Brad Jorgensen:

The other thing is using your free time and organizing your free time. Most high school kids sit in a classroom for seven hours a day. In college, a three-hour day is a long one, but it comes with an expectation that you're using that extra time to be doing the work that you should be doing. So, I think one of the benefits of being a student athlete is a lot of us in the athletic department have mandatory study halls for our teams. We do check in with their professors to make sure they're going to class and doing the things they should be doing. It's an extra set of eyes and it does force organization. "I got to be in class at this time. I've got to be at practice at this time. I got to be at lifts at this time." Odds are, you're also going to block off the time to get your work done. I think sometimes not having a lot on your plate, makes it harder to be organized and to use your time effectively. The busier you are, the more efficient you become in scheduling yourself.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. That is a really good point. And I know if this is something else you kind of alluded to, but as far as life after college, after education, what kind of professional opportunities exist out there for say a really talented lacrosse player, maybe someone who potentially could pursue coaching or other ways that they can actually use skills as a lacrosse player?

Brad Jorgensen:

Sure. No, I think besides the obvious general benefits of being a college athlete and how much employers like that on your resume, lacrosse specifically, it's an interesting time in the world of professional lacrosse. There's been an outdoor professional league for quite some time. Actually one of our 2018 graduates was drafted by the Denver franchise in that particular league, but a new upstart outdoor league started the summer, sort of AFL, NFL type relationship right there right now. And then there is a professional indoor league. We do recruit a lot of Canadian kids whose experience is more five on five indoor on a hockey rink type setup. And that's what the professional indoor league is. I would say from a coaching standpoint, there's a couple of ways to go. You can go my way, which is the college route and try to coach at this level.

Brad Jorgensen:

There's more and more folks now making a living running club programs. A lot of areas. The high schools don't necessarily have the resources to provide the coaching and provide the experience that a lot of lacrosse guys want. So there's a pretty robust club culture in lacrosse that people are making a living off of. And there's all the little things. We have a young man who just graduated in May who's going to England as part of a program. He's getting a free master's degree. He's going to play for the Durham University team and help coach the younger guys and they take care of his master's degree and his rent. So there's all kinds of different things you can do with lacrosse post graduation.

Greg Lindberg:

Interesting. And then, just in terms of yourself as a head coach, what would you say you enjoy most about your role?

Brad Jorgensen:

I would say it's never the same challenge twice. People could look back and say, "Wow, he's been in one place for 15 years. When's it going to start to get stale? When's it going to start to be a rut?" And the thing about doing this professionally is it's never the same problem. Every morning at seven o'clock

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when I roll into the office, it's a new challenge every day. It's a new challenge every semester. It's a new challenge every year. It really never is the same thing twice. You certainly see some patterns as you get older and sometimes you know what to expect and you see some things coming down the tracks, but the reality is it really is a fresh new challenge, whether it be daily or whether it be annually.

Greg Lindberg:

Oh, I see. And then do you have any kind of professional goals that you really would like to attain in your career?

Brad Jorgensen:

I wake up everyday pleased as Punch, somebody pays me to do what I want to do.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Brad Jorgensen:

That's about as deep as it gets. I think I know I harp on my players to be process-oriented not destination-oriented and I try to live that way too. I didn't think once in 2018 about trying to get to the national championship until we were getting on the bus to go to the airport to fly to Boston. And that's how you get there. You do the right thing every day. You do the best you can every day. And one day you look up and you're where you want to be. So I wouldn't say that I've really got sort of that post-it note on the refrigerator home that is reminding me of my dream. I get to do it every day. Somebody is paying me to do what I'd love to do.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah. Yeah. Very well said. And then in terms of lacrosse, I know you did touch on some of the professional leagues and it's obviously even at the college level, it sounds like lacrosse in general is a growing sport in this country.

Brad Jorgensen:

Yeah. The participation numbers at the high school level have steadily climbed every year. It's been about 15 straight years or so, where lacrosse has been one of the top two or three growth sports at the high school level. It really did sort of have its origins in a very small geographic area of the country. And then guys like me moved to places like this and they want their kids to play. The next thing, there's a youth league and those types of things. So it has spread. I think last time I counted our roster has 17 different states and two Canadian provinces represented.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Brad Jorgensen:

So we are pulling kids from all over the country. So yeah, the games growing at the youth level, which means it's going to grow at our level eventually as well.

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Greg Lindberg:

Very cool. Definitely exciting times for lacrosse. I did want to mention, now you can visit saintleolions.com, which is our official athletic site for all Saint Leo athletics. And I know there's a lot on lacrosse on there, so feel free to check that out and Brad, I wanted to thank you so much for joining me on the Saint Leo 360 Podcast.

Brad Jorgensen:

It's been a pleasure anytime.

Speaker 1:

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