


For the love of the
G A M E

CALS alumni careers keep
them in the game

BY VANESSA BEESON



AS THE DIAMOND DAWGS became crown-
ing national champions for the first time
in history, many a Mississippi State fan
understood the elated feeling of a goal that
felt forever in the making. While a select
few athletes have a personal hand in delivering
such an indelible feat, many more athletes at the
high school and college levels will ultimately find
themselves pursuing other passions and careers.
They may never play in the College World Series,
but they're still driven by a love of the game. CALS
alumni Jordan Treadway and Marshall Jennings
share a passion as head groundskeepers of two
spring training facilities for major league teams
while Chandler Knox found his life's work helping
collegiate student-athletes fuel up nutritionally.

Jordan Treadway.
(Photo submitted)

JORDAN TREADWAY

A LOVE OF BASEBALL led Jordan Treadway to become director of grounds and maintenance of the Roger Dean Chevrolet Stadium in Jupiter, Florida.

The 2006 alumnus graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Agronomy with a golf and sports turf management concentration. He swung his first bat at age three.

“Playing in high school was one of the best experiences of my life,” he remembered.

After graduation, he played at Northwest Mississippi Community College in Senatobia. Transferring to MSU two years later, Treadway tried out for the team he grew up loving.

“Playing baseball at MSU had always been my dream,” he said. “Coach Ron Polk had better ideas for both of us. I was there a week and was told it was time to move on, so I traded in my bat and glove for a rake.”

Turfgrass was always Treadway’s backup plan as a way to stay in the game. Growing up, he worked the family farm, where his father is still a fifth-generation farmer. That said, Treadway’s dad encouraged him to try his hand at something other than life on the farm. Treadway felt a career outdoors would suit him best and the answer came while watching a baseball game as a teenager.

“I remember during the College World Series, a player’s name and major flashed on the screen. It said

golf and sports turf management and I thought, ‘What is this?’” Treadway said.

He’d already been taking care of the field at his high school.

“My coaches cared about the field and it carried over to us. We took pride in making sure the field looked great every time we played a game,” he said.

He said the best part of his job is spending every day contributing to America’s favorite pastime.

“It’s a dream come true. Two days are hardly ever the same. We have to adapt and go with what Mother Nature throws at us, so it never gets stagnant,” he said.

His role is no walk in the park—overseeing 90 acres total in the 13-field complex, which includes a stadium

field that holds 7,000 people. All fields are designed to MLB specifications and the complex also includes two half fields, two agility fields at 10,000 square feet each, and six batting cages. The grounds include Celebration Bermudagrass, St. Augustinegrass, and Bahiagrass.

The crew stays busy year-round but it’s all hands-on deck from February through the beginning of April when the St. Louis Cardinals and Miami Marlins are onsite for their spring training. In addition to the MLB spring training, both clubs’ minor league teams are also playing at the park resulting in between 400–600 players using all 13 fields from morning to evening.

“It’s our busiest and most intense time of year when all eyes are on us and everything has to be perfect,” he said.

Summer months are the most strenuous

time at the park, according to Treadway.

“During the rainy season from May to July, we’ll have professional ball or amateur tournaments on every field. It can rain at any time, so our crew is always in position to tarp every field at a moment’s notice,” he said.

When Treadway was an MSU student, he interned at the park he now manages.

“My boss then—Marshall Jennings—was a MSU grad who took me under his wing,” he remembered.

He said the university prepared him in more ways than one.

“MSU’s internship program contributed to my success more than anything by helping me gain the practical experience and confidence needed to enter the workforce. It’s still one of the best I see out there when

I’m talking to perspective interns,” he said. “Agronomically, MSU gave me a great base which I lean on every day.”

Treadway said the crew helps drive the momentum to take care of the park day in and day out.

“I get to work with the best coworkers and aspiring turf managers. Seeing everyone’s passion is a joy that keeps me engaged,” he said.

And now it’s the summer interns that inspire him as well.

“Our interns show up the first of May when we’ve already been through the ringer. Seeing them come in full of questions, passion, and energy fires me up for the rest of the summer. It’s also very rewarding to mentor someone and have them still come ask you for advice ten years down the road,” he said.



MARSHALL JENNINGS

MORE THAN A DECADE AGO, Treadway's mentor, Marshall Jennings, left South Florida with an annual rainfall of 60 inches of rain to come to Scottsdale, Arizona with an annual rainfall of six. While the terrain and turfgrass are different (Tifway 419 Bermudagrass overseeded with perennial ryegrass every fall), the love of the game remains the same.

Jennings is head groundskeeper at Salt River Fields at Talking Stick, the only MLB spring training field on tribal land. The spring training home to the Arizona Diamondbacks and Colorado Rockies has a stadium field that holds more than 12,000 fans. The 140-acre facility includes an additional 12 regulation-size baseball fields, four half fields, two agility fields, three bunting fields, and 12 acres of multipurpose fields for other events.

The Ripley, Tennessee native played baseball all through high school and attended Lambuth University in Jackson, Tennessee on a baseball scholarship.

"Two years later, my playing days were over, but I wanted to stay close to the game," he said.

Jennings transferred to MSU and earned a Bachelor of Science in Agronomy with a golf and sports turf management concentration in 1999. While Jennings grew up surrounded by Ole Miss fans, his two years in Starkville solidified his love of the Diamond Dogs.

"I became an MSU baseball fan even though both my dad and uncle went to Ole Miss and played ball there. MSU wasn't on my radar as a kid because I grew up going to Ole Miss games. Nowadays, I watch Mississippi State instead of Ole Miss," he said.

Growing up in Tennessee, Jennings was an avid fan of both the Atlanta Braves and the St. Louis Cardinals. The first because his first internship, the latter his first big job in the big leagues.

"My goal shifted from wanting to



Marshall Jennings (photo submitted)

work at a MLB stadium to a spring training facility when I interned for the Atlanta Braves at what was then ESPN's Wide World of Sports," he said.

He credits MSU for helping him get his start in the industry.

"MSU's internship program helped get my foot in the door of the Atlanta Braves facility and I think my degree and experience helped me land that first job out of college," he said. "The plant and soil science component plays a critical role in the day-to-day operation in our facility even now. I regularly use what I learned in the classroom."

After two years working turf at Tulane University, Jennings went to Jupiter, Florida, with the St. Louis Cardinals and the Miami Marlins, before heading out West. Now in Arizona, similar to Treadway on the East Coast, Jennings and his crew are full throttle from February through April as the Rockies and Diamondbacks descend on the desert for back-to-back games.

"The spring training schedule can feel a lot like the movie 'Groundhog Day' where we lose track of what day of the week it is. It's a fine oiled machine that runs like clockwork where we might have five games at one time for more than 30 days in a row," he said.

After that, it's extended spring training for the minor league club, which transitions to the Arizona Complex League, rookie-level baseball consisting mostly of players 18-21 years old, that runs through mid-September. There is also amateur baseball and soccer on the multipurpose field that might run five to seven nights a week depending on the time of the year. Baseball gears back up in the fall for a six-week schedule of the Arizona Fall League. There are also festivals and events held in the cooler months of the year.

In addition to managing the fields for all of that, Jennings also handles all the booking of sports rentals, which generates additional revenue from May through December.

"I know the downtime the fields need to recover from cultural practices, so I can stagger rentals around that but also hit specific revenue goals as well. At first, I was apprehensive about taking on that role, but I figured out we could schedule accordingly to protect the fields and not overextend the crew while still making revenue goals," he said.

Jennings said that the best part of the job is the location.

"I'm at the ballpark every day. What most people consider entertainment is a regular day for me," he said.

CHANDLER KNOX

FOR CHANDLER KNOX, a love of both sports and nutrition led the way to his current position as sport dietitian for the Georgia Tech Athletic Association.

“I loved sports growing up and always knew as a kid I wanted to be involved in sports in some way,” he said.

The Atlanta resident grew up in Birmingham and his family moved to Atlanta when he was in high school. He played baseball and football as a child and wrestled in high school. When it came time to attend college, a visit to MSU sealed the deal for Knox.

“I fell in love with MSU on a visit—the whole bulldog family atmosphere hit home for me. I also knew I wanted to go to a school that had football Saturdays. MSU checked all the boxes for me,” he said.

He earned a bachelor’s in food science, nutrition and health promotion with a food and nutrition concentration in 2016 and master’s in the same subject with a health promotion concentration in 2019. He volunteered with MSU Sports Nutrition as an undergrad from 2013–2014. In 2016, he matched to the MSU Dietetic Internship with the Department of Nutrition, Food Science and Health Promotion. He then organized a sports nutrition rotation within the dietetic internship, which opened the door for employment at Georgia Tech.

“Everything I focused on, even in

college, was performance-based,” he said. “In addition to my own focus on performance, the food science and nutrition foundation I learned at MSU makes me a more effective practitioner.”

While Knox always loved sports, it was his time as a high school wrestler that really got him thinking about nutrition.

“As a high school wrestler myself, I know these young athletes don’t always have the tools they need to make good decisions,” he said.

The experience informed his dietetic internship research project, which resulted in a published paper in *The Sport Journal*.

“I focused on high school wrestlers and wrestling coaches, their knowledge of and behavior toward nutrition including weight cutting tactics. I learned that we need to rely on dietitians to educate these student-athletes and their coaches,” he said.

A typical day at Georgia Tech has Knox working with the sports team and conducting one-on-one counseling sessions with student-athletes as he helps the players get the fuel they need for the performance they desire.

“With football, for instance, we’re there for performance fueling beforehand, during practice as a resource, and immediately after practice, to make sure they’re recovering properly,” he said. “Counseling sessions run the gamut from student-athletes who know about nutrition and want to prep meals for themselves to student-athletes who’ve never considered nutrition as a factor that affects performance. I try to meet the individual wherever they are in the process and guide them from there.”

Knox noted while Georgia Tech has 17 sports, there are only two dietitians so oftentimes he and

his supervisor divide and conquer.

“We work on football together, I cover women’s basketball, she covers men’s basketball, and we tag team the rest,” he explained.

On game days, he’s always on the sidelines whether that’s at home or on the road.

“I’m at every game on the sideline. It’s a lot of observation. You do a lot of the work beforehand, you know through weight charting or camps what to look out for to make sure the players have the fuel they need to perform well on the field or court,” he said.

Knox says his favorite part of his job is the relationship building.

“The relationship building is huge for me. While nutrition may not be the reason we win, seeing someone you’re working with go through actual changes in their behavior and see results because of it—either by getting faster or stronger—is extremely rewarding,” he said. 🐾



Chandler Knox (photo by Georgia Tech Athletics)