

A-STATE'S NEW AD IS READY TO HOWL

BY AUDREY HANES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONNER

The 2025-26 athletics season promises to be an exciting one for the Arkansas State University Red Wolves, from football and basketball to volleyball and bowling. All of the school's athletic programs will be under the leadership of new Vice Chancellor for Intercollegiate Athletics Chris Pezman, who brings with him decades of experience and big dreams for all of A-State's athletes, coaches and fans.

AN EXPERIENCED HISTORY

Pezman relates well to the student athletes and their coaches and says he is already able to anticipate many of their needs because he has walked in their shoes. He was a three-year football letterman at the University of Houston (1990-92) and served as the captain during his final season with the team. After graduating with a degree in economics, he then went on to serve as a graduate assistant coach for a year before becoming the assistant to the director of athletics for two years while working on his master's degree in hotel and restaurant management.

"I think (being a former student athlete and coach) gives you credibility with the coaches and kids to an extent," said Pezman. "You still have to earn that and maintain that, but having been in those positions, understanding the pace of the lifestyle as a coach, I know that it's a 24/7 demanding profession. ... Saturdays or game days are a lot of fun, you get to relish in those moments of representing the university and competing, but at the same time, it's all the things in between to get you to that point. ... Having an understanding of what the cycle of a game week is like from a student-athlete perspective, but also from a coach's, it gives you that frame of reference when it comes to what coaches need and how to support them and the program."

As A-State's 14th director of athletics, Pezman comes to the Jonesboro university after seven years at the University of Houston. During his time at his alma mater, he helped orchestrate the school's transition to the Big 12 Conference and supported teams across nine different sports that won more than 30 conference championships. Those same teams consistently participated in NCAA postseason competition, including the men's basketball team reaching five consecutive NCAA Tournaments and making a Final Four appearance in 2021. Pezman is also known for his focus

on education, with more than 500 student-athletes named to the university's Dean's List and more than 400 earning their degrees while he was there.

Prior to his time at Houston, Pezman spent four years as a senior associate athletics director at the University of California-Berkeley, where he focused on operational and financial efficiencies. Before that was the start of his career in collegiate athletics administration during his first stint at Houston, where he was the assistant athletics director for football operations for the 2012 and 2013 seasons. His venture into athletics administration followed 12 years of working within the executive management team at Reliant Park, one of the world's largest sports and entertainment complexes.

"There are lessons along the way at every stop that you bring to these roles," said Pezman. "It's a complicated time in higher ed and in college athletics. A lot of it is obviously resource management—money, people and time—learning how to set expectations and keep people motivated in a positive way. I think having good energy really matters, especially when you're coming into a new situation, because you want to be able to uplift people through transition and try to make sure everybody feels good about what they're doing."

"We have things to fix and things to get better at, but we need to do it with the right mindset. It's easy to come in and say, 'We need to fix this, we need to fix that.' But if you do it in a positive manner, it means a lot more and it's a lot easier to get done."

A-State Chancellor Dr. Todd Shields says that experience, along with his positive mindset and long list of qualifications, made him a perfect fit for the Red Wolves and the culture that administrators are hoping to support.

"It was clear from the beginning that Chris Pezman brought the right blend of experience, heart and vision to lead our athletics program," said Shields. "His proven success at Houston—on the field, in the classroom and in the community—speaks volumes. But what stood out most was his energy, his integrity and his understanding of what it means to be a student-athlete. In addition to winning programs, he builds culture, connection and pride. That's the kind of leadership we were looking for at Arkansas State."

Former A-State women's volleyball coach David Rehr, who is

now the coach at Houston and who worked with Pezman for five years there, says A-State is lucky to have him.

"I have a lot of good friends in Jonesboro who are die hard Red Wolves fans, and I got so many calls and texts trying to vet him out," said Rehr. "It was a no-brainer; I told them all, 'You're going to love him.' He is such a humble man. It is rare in his line of work, but he really is one of the most caring men I've ever met. He cared and was always checking in on us when we were bad for two years; he was the most supportive and complimentary while we built the program up. And when we got good, he helped take us to the next step. He's not done just moving programs forward, he will find the next steps and just keep taking that success to another level."

"I've been in this 25 years and have had six or seven ADs. He is the only one I've had who would reach out just to check on you. He honestly cares."

Rehr is just one of the many former Red Wolves Pezman crossed paths with over the years who made the new AD excited about A-State and the City of Jonesboro.

"Arkansas State is a program that from the outside ... has had a lot of success," said Pezman. "Through my professional journey, I have overlapped with people who had been here (at A-State)—Terry Mohajir, David Rehr, who was a volleyball coach I hired from Arkansas State to Houston, Brian Gerwig, who is our volleyball coach now who was at Houston, and another guy by the name of Jason Penry who used to be in development here at A-State—they always talked so fondly of their time here."

"When the opportunity presented itself, it felt right. ... Hearing so much about the leadership on campus and also about the community, it felt like a place we wanted to be. We interviewed in Little Rock, so I had never been to Jonesboro. I kind of took the job sight unseen. ... It's been awesome. The more we are here, we love it even more. The people are incredible."

#ONEPACK

The 2025-26 school year is under way, and just a couple of short months after moving to Jonesboro, Pezman is already working towards a campus-wide focus.

"I think one thing that's very important that doesn't get talked about enough is the alignment in the leadership on campus and at the system level," said Pezman "It's critical. Without that, it's hard to get things done. We are really lucky with Dr. Shields, Dr. (Brendan) Kelly, the Board of Trustees and the administration on campus and at the system office. They get it. For that, I'm appreciative and grateful. Everyone here on campus and at the system office has been so kind, and everyone in the community has been so kind. It's been cool to see."

Shields says that he and the new AD have shared goals under the #OnePack initiative, a university-wide effort that is working to support success on and off the field.

"In the short term, Chris and I are focused on integrating Red Wolves Athletics operations across the entire university under the #OnePack initiative, enriching the student-athlete experience and improving facilities in need of upgrade," said Shields. "Long term, we're building a sustainable model for competitive excellence through the changing landscape of college athletics."

"At A-State, we are building a #OnePack championship culture, which means aligning our entire university around shared



values and purpose. #OnePack breaks down silos across campus and connects athletic success to academics, fundraising, finances, communications, facilities, community engagement and our public service mission. ... We are working to unify our team and Red Wolves everywhere to maximize impact. When others panicked after the NCAA House settlement, we leaned into who we are and became a model for what's possible."

Pezman's goals are aligned with Shields', particularly when it comes to #OnePack.

"Resources are tight; how can we integrate ourselves better into campus so we can all be on the initiatives we're trying to solve?"



said Pezman. “... We have to figure out a way to work together more seamlessly so our donors aren’t being fatigued, having that alignment on campus and working together. As we are chasing new revenue opportunities, you have to have a more nimble approach.”

“It also goes back to human resources. If campus is slower and we need extra bodies, whether it’s facilities or academic counseling, how do we have a singular mission? Helping each other will help all of us be successful.”

READY TO HOWL

From day one, the new AD has been busy getting to know all of the A-State coaches and student athletes, making it a point to spend time with each and every coach and their staff.

“We’ve got a great stable of coaches; I walked into a really great situation,” said Pezman. “The coaching here is excellent, there is no mission critical. There are a lot of things we need to address, but we have a great foundation. ... We have great people in head coaching roles, and that gets me excited.”

Pezman says the staff has been incredibly helpful during the transition.

“They’ve been open to suggestions or changes and very helpful,” he said.

Right off the bat, the football team heads to War Memorial Stadium in Little Rock to take on the University of Arkansas in an unprecedented intra-state rivalry game on Sept. 6. It’s a match up Pezman says goes back to the root of what college sports are supposed to feel like for fans and one he hopes to see repeat in the future.

“I am surprised it’s the first time this game has happened,” said Pezman. “Our fans are chomping at the bit for the opportunity for the game. It’s the type of game where you hop in a car and drive and it means a lot, and that’s what college sports are supposed to

be like. I know our fans are really looking forward to that Saturday. We do have a home game before that we can’t lose sight of, but our fans are ready to roll into Little Rock.”

Pezman’s goal for the near future is to make sure every department feels supported for their upcoming season.

“Right now, I’m trying to get in and stabilize everything,” said Pezman. “We’ve had some turnover, and that’s natural. I’m trying to make sure we are fully staffed, first and foremost. Then figuring out as quickly as possible what we are good at and what we need to get better at. We are focused on supporting each department through revenue right now, so figuring out how to activate as quickly as possible.”

Long term, Pezman says the goal is to make games of all sports so much fun to attend that they can compete with the convenience of fans watching sports from their own homes.

“It’s an interesting time in higher ed, particularly in college athletics,” he said. “The industry is dealing with compensating student athletes, where that money is going to come from and the pressure it puts on institutions. We have to figure out a long, sustainable way to do that. It’s getting the community to buy into that. There’s a lot that goes into it – figuring out how we can activate Jonesboro to get people to show up. We have to create the fear of missing out on game day. We battle someone sitting at home watching a 70-inch TV. We have to create environments in our venues and create that pageantry.”

“There is a feeling on game day you can’t replicate. We need to have 25,000 to 30,000 people in (the stadium) regardless of the opponent, and same thing with the arena. We have to get better with football attendance. Those are the principal revenue sports. When they’re doing well, the rising tide lifts all boats. We have some great programs – baseball is on the rise, and we could win a national championship in bowling; that’s new to me. To me,



success is being in the top one-third in the Sun Belt in each of our sports and getting to compete in conference championships.”

Next up are plans to build an indoor practice facility for baseball, which Pezman wants to utilize as a sport for the community to be engaged in during non-football and basketball seasons.

“For baseball to be so popular for us in Jonesboro and the region we are in, we have under invested,” said Pezman. “But now with the things we have done and will do, we will catch up pretty quickly. In the spring, A-State baseball is what this community can buy into. It gives the community something else to do in terms of lifestyle and entertainment. We want to afford that option for them to come on campus and for fans to have a chance to really stay connected to the university in the spring.”

SCARLET AND BLACK SUPPORT

Shields says Pezman has received a warm welcome and is already fitting in well on campus and in the community.

“Even in these first few weeks, the response to Pez has been tremendous,” said Shields. “Our fans have welcomed him with open arms, our coaches respect his leadership, and our student-athletes see someone who genuinely understands their journey. He’s shown up with energy, humility and an appreciation for what makes this community special. It’s clear that he’s already part of the Red Wolves family.”

Pezman’s own family is supportive of the move and is enjoying Jonesboro so far. He and his wife, Marisol, have three grown children, Seth, Sydney and Sarah, the youngest of whom is driving from the University of Oklahoma over Labor Day weekend to support her dad during the Red Wolves’ home opener.

“Everybody told us how good the people are; it’s what we hoped it would be, and it’s been even better,” said Pezman. “My family gets

here this weekend, and I can’t wait for them to be here full time. People here are all so nice and welcoming, and it’s not transactional, it’s genuine. I want to make sure we are giving that back. It’s important we pour into the community as much as they give to us. I can’t wait to experience that over the course of the year.”

Rehr says Pezman deserves to be in a community that will support him and his vision like the City of Jonesboro will.

“For the athletic community and people who care about the Red Wolves, he will be present,” said Rehr. “He cares about the sports. He will take care of the teams and all the little things, he’ll be involved with those. I would work for him again in a heartbeat. ...

“He will be a part of the community and honestly care about everything the people in the City of Jonesboro care about. Sometimes with the Red Wolves, when someone sees success, they leave. I don’t think that will be Chris. I think he found a place he can call home.”

So far, the new AD, who rides his motorcycle to work on the weekends, is looking forward to settling down in a new part of the country – one with less humidity than he’s used to.

Heading into his first year at Arkansas State, Pezman’s message to those supportive fans is to simply come out for Red Wolves games across all sports.

“We need everybody here, and that’s more important now than ever before,” he said. “Something I’ve learned in this role now, is that the fans and the student athletes, they play off each other. It starts with the student body, then the other fans, then you can see that energy on the field and courts, and it will carry a team through a season, whether it’s football or volleyball or baseball. We want it to be the place no other team wants to play because of its rabid fans making it so hard to come in and win here.”