

Double-Teamed

College coaches and faculty share a joint interest in the development of student-athletes

SUZANNE R. COFFEY

“**T**here are now more than 400,000 NCAA student-athletes ... and almost all of them will go pro in something other than sports.”

This commercial hooks me every time. If you’ve witnessed another March Madness season, you know the ad I mean. The image is black and white. The message is one of anonymity. These students grew up in your town, participate at your alma mater and will eventually work in every profession. The NCAA wants us to know that there are hundreds of thousands of college men and women doing what they’ve done since grade school: transporting themselves emotionally and intellectually between classrooms and athletics venues.

Consider the earlier version of the NCAA’s campaign to promote *student-plus-athlete*. In 2003, the association rolled out its first of these advertisements. It said simply, “360,000 student-athletes, and each one of us is getting two educations.” It was more representative of, or should I say more consistent with, what athletes and coaches know and what faculty resist. Two educations are available to those who are fortunate enough to continue their athletic careers at our nation’s colleges and universities. The first kind, the most obvious and most important, is the education garnered when students are challenged to excel, experiment and stretch intellectually. Many faculty colleagues see this principal education as exclusively important. But for college athletes, it’s one component of a full education.

The other education the NCAA ad refers to is that which is also common in college sports. The references: excel, experiment and stretch are all reciprocally significant in the athletics setting. College athletes do not swap their minds for tennis shoes when they enter the gymnasium.

The intellectual vibrancy sought after in the classroom is alive and well in the last place faculty would think to look. Our fields and courts are humming with good minds processing complex patterns, reacting to variations, listening for cues, unpacking and reassembling the next moves (of the ball, the teammates, the opponents) before they happen.

The better the mind, the better the athlete. It’s no surprise that Stanford University leads the race again this year for the cup that signifies the top all-around athletic program in Division I. A scan of last year’s Top 10 also includes Berkeley. The Division III race annually includes Amherst and Williams colleges in the Top Five. Not a lightweight in the crowd. And yet, these are the very places where faculty members are most likely to

be dismissive of not only the teaching and learning that happens on the fields outside their ivy-sheathed windows, but also disdainful of the intellectual competence required to compete at the top of collegiate sport. I have a theory about this.

Faculty colleagues are envious. They covet the passion plainly exhibited in the eyes of an athlete attentively taking in every word during a 30-second timeout. They begrudge the voluntary extra workouts. They envy the edge-of-the-chair eagerness athletes demonstrate in team meetings.

They’re also jealous of the intensity of the relationships created and sustained, some for decades beyond the athlete’s college career. Coaches who spend their tenure at places like Amherst choose to work with students who question everything, analyze both strategy and training and bring considerable intellectual *joie de vivre* to the field and court. Athletes are perceptive and focused. And they possess the capacity to work hard even when other factors might distract them. Faculty colleagues see this intensity and work ethic in athletes and rightly wish this were expressed in all students in their classrooms.

It’s up to the athletics community to create the bridges between two educations, to move faculty friends from dismissive to collaborative. No one else is going to do this for us. After all, to coach is to teach. Successful coaches must master the ability to engage each student regardless of preparation, learning style and capacity. Faculty colleagues and coaches are doing the same work in their discrete disciplines.

To encourage professors to value what happens inside this athletics education, coaches and athletics administrators (and student-athletes) have to be willing to make a few adjustments.

For starters, demystify coaching. Invite faculty inside the huddle by employing a faculty-liaisons model. Recruit and assign faculty members to serve as team advisors and mentors; one faculty member per team is a good start. Include that colleague in as many team activities as their time and energy will allow. Some professors will participate in fitness work, others in team meetings, still others as bench coaches. All forms of involvement are appropriate. When this works well, the professor and the coach work together on a range of team-centered issues from group dynamics to academic and life advising to recruiting. Coaches and faculty members want the same outcomes including attracting and supporting the very brightest students. When they work together, these goals are achieved more readily, and the act of coaching as teaching is underscored.

Select coaching professionals with broad intellectual interests. Evaluate them on the application of those interests in their coaching. Former Duke University and Wellesley College President Nannerl Keohane suggests, “One of the traditional justifications for a liberal education has been that the leaders of a society should have some common reference points” such as *excel*, *experiment* and *stretch*. Coaches and teachers, having chosen this life of educating college students, come equipped with both the interest in and the capacity for mutual interests. Connecting the specialization of the neuroscientist and the offensive coordinator is the commitment to continued learning. Hire coaches whose academic background and continued education is grounded in the liberal arts. Ask of these same coaches that they share these interests with their students. Under the coaches’ guidance, teams should go beyond the bus-ride-length political debate and extend their discourse to shared reading. Our Amherst teams went home this summer with reading lists. Come fall, they’ll share their impressions with one another in meetings set aside just for this purpose. This encouragement of team activities which blur the lines between two kinds of education serves us all well.

Puncture the barriers that define (and ghettoize) athletes. Coaches and professors should insist that students end the self-diminishing prophecy, “I’m a basketball player,” and replace it with, “I’m a chemistry major, and I play basketball.” We can all do more to

disabuse recruits of the notion that they must present themselves on just one dimension. William Bowen claims one of the experiences that prompted him to co-write *The Game of Life* was an encounter with a Princeton student who when asked why she chose Princeton, rather than cite all the academic opportunity and her considerable intellectual talent, told her university’s president that she came to play softball. It seems benign enough, but the question of how one identifies herself or himself speaks volumes in a setting where faculty members crave constant affirmation of the primacy of the core educational mission.

We need to feed the faculty’s appetite for affirming a student-first educational model that respects that valuable learning happens on both sides of this equation, and that excellent teachers armed with whistles or whiteboards have something to learn from each other

Our most talented student-athletes have chosen colleges and universities where they can continue their education in both realms of their academic and athletic lives. When our classroom colleagues appreciate the complementary education the college athletics experience provides, we’ll have a better chance of extending a dialogue that explores how the minds of the best and brightest are most successfully developed through many forms of education.

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