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Student Athletics and Honors: Building Relationships

James J. Clauss and Ed Taylor
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Few university administrators today would argue against having more student athletes applying for and successfully completing honors curricula. Such students are great for PR. But, sad to say, coaches and faculty, at least at tier-1 universities like the University of Washington, are often suspicious of each other's intentions. Some coaches see too much focus on education as a threat to their team's success and ultimately their jobs; some faculty see athletes, especially in the revenue sports, as uncommitted to education, exploited by universities, and biding their time in school to enter the lucrative professional careers they believe await them. Yet, there exists a goal that both honors students and student athletes, faculty and coaches, share, a goal that could well provide the basis for beginning a productive relationship, namely the pursuit of excellence. In what follows, we make the case that Honors is uniquely situated to assist in the creative development of the way professors and coaches see student athletes. Our case is based on courses offered to student athletes that were overseen by the UW Honors Program and on the useful exchanges the program developed with Student Athletic Services and Undergraduate Academic Affairs, the unit in which the honors program is housed at the University of Washington. This three-way relationship was not part of a preconceived plan; rather, we followed where circumstances led. What we offer here thus represents observations and suggestions, not a fully developed model.

In 2007, the University of Washington men's basketball team had the opportunity to travel to Greece to play five exhibition games with local professional teams over ten days. Looking for ways to add an academic experience to the trip, the Associate Athletic Director for Student Development contacted Ed Taylor, Dean and Vice Provost of Undergraduate Academic Affairs (UAA). Taylor in turn contacted the incoming Director of the Honors Program and Professor of Classics, James Clauss, to discuss the possibility. Clauss developed a class on Socrates and, for the week before the group traveled to Greece, the student athletes read and discussed several Platonic dialogues featuring the early Socrates (*Apology*, *Crito*, part of the *Phaedo,* and *Euthyphro*). These texts introduce clearly and dramatically an approach to

inquiry that bears the name of its chief proponent: the Socratic method. Socrates as represented by Plato continues to entice readers of all ages to take up his call to question our most cherished presuppositions and biases. These works are typically a slam dunk in the classroom, and this was our experience with the Husky basketball team.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the pre-trip class was the fact that the coach, Lorenzo Romar, attended all of the sessions. Romar's influence on the success of the course was crucial. He took this educational opportunity seriously, so the students did as well. The student athletes of this highly competitive team contributed to class discussions, some of which were heated, and both during and after the trip completed all of the writing assignments, including the composition of dialogues on topics such as the nature of justice, goodness, and success. During the last class before the trip, one of the student athletes exclaimed with apparent surprise: "I can't believe it. I'm a philosopher!" The athlete identified himself, possibly for the first time, as a student. It was a transformative moment in the life of this individual and the rest of the class, who realized that they too had entered into a different relationship with education.

On one level the academic experience was successful because the student athletes read the material, engaged in discussions not only in class but in the locker room and completed all the writing assignments. But a more powerful measure of the class's success can be seen in what happened afterwards. One of the basketball players was later selected to play with the USA team in Serbia, and on his own he found a way to turn his journey to the Balkans into an academic experience modeled on the previous trip. The influence of the Greece trip did not stop with basketball. Inspired by this event, the coaches of the women's soccer team and women's golf team contacted Taylor and Clauss to ask for assistance in creating academic experiences for their teams going, respectively, to Brazil and New Zealand, for which professors in appropriate disciplines were drafted. The potential long-term success lay not in these individual classes but in the creation of a relationship between individuals willing to work together. Trust and mutual respect between teachers and students, professors and coaches, opened a new and promising rapport between honors and student athletics. The willingness on the part of a program associated with academic excellence to cooperate in an educational endeavor with a program associated with athletic excellence was—as Bill and Ted, protégés of Socrates (pronounced "So-Crates"), might have put it—"most excellent."

Because Coach Romar was willing to sit in on the classes, he witnessed first-hand the positive response that his players had to what might have seemed esoteric philosophical texts. Not only did their studies not get in the

way of the athletes' preparation for the exhibition games, but those same young men identified themselves as students, appeared to enjoy learning the material, and competed unhindered by the foray into pure academia. (That the Huskies won the PAC-10 championship in 2009, however, is probably unrelated.) During the trip, Romar built in time for the class to meet, and he and the other coaches accompanied the team to the various sites, confirming the importance of encountering ancient and modern Greece. The team members took the educational side of the trip seriously because their coaches did.

Developments after the trip in 2007 have included a number of phone calls and emails from coaches and assistants asking about student recruits who expressed an interest in honors. We plan to encourage other sports programs to look to honors as a partner in attracting outstanding student athletes. Also, Taylor has organized joint meetings between advisors in student athletics and UAA in order to further the connection between the two units and create avenues for student athletes to feel more a part of campus life, a problem that can be acute at a large state university where athletes often live and eat separately from the rest of the student body.

Honors programs and colleges may be uniquely positioned to work with athletic departments in part because of their shared commitment to excellence. Honors students and student athletes both strive to excel in their various arenas. Professors and coaches, as educators in their respective fields, want to work with superstars, athletic and academic. We have common ground upon which to build a solid foundation for future cooperation.

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