

# ASU student-athletes strive to break negative stereotype

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When “student-athlete” is mentioned, it is almost natural to scoff at the first half of the phrase. However, 19 ASU athletes had 4.0 GPAs through their entire careers. Although they acknowledge a negative stereotype exists, the Sun Devils are relentlessly trying to set a new standard.

The ASU Athletics Department certainly wants the students to succeed athletically, but more importantly it wants them to succeed in life.

“It’s as important as life or death,” Jean Boyd, ASU Senior Associate Athletic Directory for the Office of Student Athlete Development said. “Someone who doesn’t live or lead a fulfilling life may feel absent. They may feel emptiness or not as alive as they could be.”

Despite a negative perception of athletes’ performances in the classroom, the Sun Devils currently boast a graduation success rate of 79 percent, which is tied for fifth in the Pac-12. Whether it is academic advisors, tutors or required study hall hours, Boyd and the rest of the athletics department do whatever is necessary to ensure their athletes are living out what it means to be a Sun Devil.

“Everyone thinks it’s so easy for athletes to get by,” volleyball junior Stephanie Preach said. “They think we don’t have to put in as much work or don’t care to, but really, athletes are forced to do well in school because if they don’t, they can’t do their job, which is being an athlete.”

Of course, all athletes want to become professionals, but the odds are simply not in their favor. Whether the student-athlete has to struggle and persevere for a degree or is a naturally gifted student is irrelevant. The degree, something senior guard Carrick Felix knows well, is arguably the most important part of college. Felix graduated ASU (B.S. Communication) in May and was accepted into the Masters of Liberal Studies program, which he will focus on while preparing for the 2012-13 basketball season.

“It’s definitely important to me to be a well rounded person and to have my education because you never know what is going to happen after basketball is done,” Felix said. “Being able to learn everyday, meet new people and accomplish things like getting a degree and a Master’s is a great feeling. Then, to have that and be an athlete is a tremendous accomplishment.”

Some recognize the importance of scholarships prior to stepping foot on a collegiate campus, but others never paid much attention to their studies. In one of many examples of the Office of Student Athlete Development's commitment to the athletes, the Scholar Baller program was created. This program motivates athletes to excel and put forth effort in the classroom.

"When I was growing up everyone wanted to be a baller, which meant status and you were at the top of your game," Boyd said. "Education was often overlooked. It wasn't cool to be smart. If you were smart you were a nerd ... By putting the word scholar with baller it creates a new meaning for individuals who don't value education. I know what a baller is. I want to be that so if something else is attached to being a baller, maybe I can be that too."

Not only does the Scholar Baller program use terminology that relates to the younger demographic, but it capitalizes on an athlete's inherent competitive nature. Whether they are motivated by the Jordan t-shirts and shorts or the patch they get to wear on their jersey, the athletes see a prize associated with achieving good grades and striving to win it. "When you wear that jersey people know you're not just a typical dumb jock," senior linebacker Brandon Magee said. "You have that Scholar Baller patch, so they know you work hard in the classroom."

However, there is more to being a successful, well-rounded person than transcripts and test scores. This is why everyone is encouraged to serve and be involved in the community. All incoming student athletes will join in a community service event prior to the start of the academic year and will also participate in the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, but service is something the athletes often do on their own time after they have been introduced to it.

"The beautiful thing about service is even if you're told you're going to do it, 99 percent of the time when you're out there you gain a deeper sense of appreciation for the opportunities that you have and a deeper sense of caring for those around you," Boyd said. "So nine times out of 10, people start volunteering on their own." Magee, one of those athletes who reaches out to the community via his own ambition, was instrumental in a program encouraging ASU student-athletes to volunteer their time at Frank Elementary school. Athletes representing most of ASU's athletic teams would travel to the school and interact with the kids while giving out t-shirts and other prizes.

"It is important because I feel like giving back connects us with them," Magee said. "It helps them know we are just normal people. Athletes get the perception of being cocky and not wanting to help anybody, but I'm trying to change everything. I want to get out there, shake everybody's hand, help the kids and help anybody I can." Although Magee's trips garner a lot of attention because he is a prominent member of the football team, service is something prevalent throughout all ASU student-athletes.

As for graduating student-athletes and making sure they are prepared for life after athletics, the message is simple. "On (the wall in the lobby) it says 'Sun Devils Graduate,'" Boyd said. "It's not a question. It's not something that we hope. There isn't a student-athlete shrugging his shoulders. If you're a Sun Devil student-athlete, that's what you do."