

# Student-Athletes Contribute More Than 2300 Hours of Community Service

## It's a Redbird Life ... by Shelly Schmidt, Redbird Insider Reporter

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**Normal, Ill.** - The 2005-06 Illinois State Redbirds brought more than 2,300 hours of community service to Bloomington-Normal thanks to the Student-Athlete Advisory Council (SAAC) of Illinois State University. In 10 months, Illinois State student-athletes accomplished double their annual goal of 1,000 community service hours.

SAAC was built to be a liaison for student-athletes with coaches and administrators, and to help coordinate community service. Illinois State student-athletes can help out in about eight different programs or organizations through SAAC and community service.

SAAC president and senior golfer **Ryan Brown** says that student-athletes can participate in community service with their team or individually.

"Each team has one volunteer service activity that they do as a team and then there's several broad activities that student-athletes can do through SAAC," Brown said. "Big Brothers, Big Sisters and the Just Read programs are popular with individual student-athletes."

SAAC and student-athletes also played bingo with residents at Heritage Manor, helped make Christmas brighter through the WJBC The Brotherhood Tree and aided those in immediate need through the Salvation Army and the Red Cross.

But an overwhelming share of those volunteer hours came from Redbird football student-athletes as part of the Scholar Baller Program. A movement which began in 1995 at Arizona State University, Scholar Baller creates team competition to promote scholarship and service among football players.

Directed by ISU Athletics Coordinator of Academic Services **Brianne Rucks**, Scholar Baller for Redbird football is a three-year-old program which produced nearly 1,600 of those community service hours in programs like the ISU Credit Union Food Drive, recess and playground renovation at local elementary schools, Relay for Life, and more.

**Andrea Mosher**, senior track and field student-athlete and a SAAC officer, will never forget collecting for hurricane victims.

"The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina brought the community together in a way that is so rare and so special," Mosher said. "The memories I have of children donating bags of pennies and nickels to the virtually anonymous checks for thousands of dollars are just small testimonies of why this community is so special."

Brown agrees with Mosher.

"For me, the biggest thing this year was when we were helping out at Schnucks for the Katrina relief," Brown said. "In the two days, we collected about \$11,000."

The service hours added up quick with Katrina relief as a host of student-athletes put long hours of their non-study, non-practice time to valuable use.

"It's important to give back to the community that has given you so much support," Brown said. "And I think the student-athletes have taken well to that idea."

To Mosher every bit of community service is rewarding.

"To see a smile on someone's face because of your simple act is humbling more than anything," Mosher said. "It really is indescribable."

A popular program with student-athletes is the Just Read program--sponsored by State Farm Insurance and the Missouri Valley Conference--where student-athletes go to elementary schools and read to young students. The amount of participants increases each year, and there are many dates and times to combat with the student-athletes crazy schedules.

"It's so amazing to see the smiles on the kids faces when you walk in," Brown said. "I think it really sparks their interests in athletics and you can see that the students and teachers really appreciate us being there."

The activity and work of the SAAC continues on throughout the athletic department and the entire Illinois State campus community. It's important for student-athletes to come together and have a little time off, so this year SAAC put on a "Player's Ball," hoping to bring teams together in a non-athletic setting.

"The ball was for student-athletes but we had everyone bring either \$2 or two canned goods to donate to a food pantry," Brown said. "Student-athletes could bring one guest, which we were hoping would help bridge the gap between student-athletes and students."

Mosher is hoping the "Player's Ball" wasn't just a one-time event.

"It was the first-ever "Player's Ball" but plans are already in the works to make it an annual event," Mosher said.



Redbird golf student-athlete Ryan Brown enjoyed his part in the Just Read program.

SAAC has different committees, such as School Spirit, Educational Outreach, Community Service, Rules and Regulations, etc. The School Spirit committee is responsible for planning events such as "Player's Ball."

The School Spirit committee, along with the rest of the committee, works hard on bridging this gap between student-athletes and all students. Cultivating school spirit and the interests of non-student-athletes is tough but important for Illinois State student-athletes.

"The main motivation isn't to get people to go to games--just to get to know student-athletes as people," Brown said. "It helps student-athletes to know that their whole school is backing them."

SAAC works within the entire athletic department to ensure that student-athletes are getting the best experience possible. One example of this is the "Adopt-a-Team" program.

"The 'Adopt-a-Team' event helps bring student-athletes closer by having one team commit to supporting another team for an entire year," Mosher said. "It helps student-athletes socialize in unique ways both in and outside of our sports."

Those 2300 hours of community service--more than double the annual goal--that SAAC and student-athletes have accomplished this year might be an unbelievable mark. But, what's more unbelievable is that the student-athletes do it out of the goodness of their hearts, and value the smiles of those they serve more than anything.

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