Successful student-athletes get decal

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This football season, 66 UCF players will wear a logo on the outside of their helmets that recognizes the importance of what fills the inside of their helmets.

The players are the most recent additions to the Scholar Baller program. Co-founded in 1995 by C. Keith Harrison, UCF professor of sports business management, Scholar Baller was designed to reward student-athletes for their classroom successes. The UCF football team marks the seventh UCF varsity sport that actively participates in the program.

The UCF student-athletes earned their "ThinkMan" decal by maintaining a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.0, achieving a 3.0 for the last semester or earning an undergraduate degree, regardless of their GPA.

The team's current combined cumulative grade point average is 2.969 and has been as high as 3.035 following the 2007 summer semester.

Kristy Belden, associate director of Academic Services for Student-Athletes, and her staff of two full-time graduate assistants and 15 to 20 tutors, said the Knights have been just as successful in their studies as they have been on the field.

"We have a very structured system in place for the players during football season," Belden said. "Each week the players are required to attend study hall for 10 hours, with at least two hours completed each and every night."

"I have to give a lot of credit to the academic support staff that comes with being a UCF athlete," junior tight end and interpersonal and organizational communications major Corey Rabazinski said. "They have tutors readily available to help us and make sure that we are staying on top of our academics with our busy schedules."

Belden said, "I think that they're doing great. I'm thrilled and couldn't be happier with their progress. They're all like little sponges and widely accept the help we offer them."
In 2007, the College of Sports Information Directors Association placed defensive lineman Keith Shologan on the Academic All-America first team in conjunction with ESPN The Magazine. Shologan was also joined by teammates Rocky Ross and Sha'reff Rashad on the all-district squad.

Last year, 30 Knights earned their bachelor's degrees. Four of these athletes - Sha'reff Rashad, Mike Lavoie, Johnell Neal and Jason Venson - are still at UCF and working on another degree. Senior place kicker Daren Daly is also included for earning his degree from the University of Miami before enrolling at UCF for graduate school this fall.

Athletes are able to continue to play college sports after they receive their first degree, as long as they have not yet played four years total within a five-year period.

"[UCF football coach George O'Leary] routinely stresses two things to us: to win games and graduate," senior safety Jason Venson said. "Luckily last year, I was able to do both by winning the Conference USA Championship and graduating with my degree in Interpersonal Communication."

"It means a lot to me to be known as a Scholar Baller," Rabazinski said, "because I think a lot of people view athletes to be only good at their sport. Academics have always been important to me, because you can never rely solely on one talent to get you by in life."
Harrison is impressed with O'Leary's heavy emphasis on the importance of his player's education and believes that education is not celebrated nearly enough.
"I've heard that O'Leary goes as far as keeping his players' weekly academic progress reports on his desk," Harrison said. "I think it's cool that 66 student-athletes, along with their coach, value academic performance and the meaning behind it because there is so much more to being an athlete than just being a jock. The whole concept of the 'Scholar Baller' program is to make the cool people smart, and the smart people cool."