

Bell: Huskies Are Becoming Scholars As Well As Ballers This Spring

Sarkisian keys on academic success through Scholar-Baller program

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SEATTLE –

March 31, 2011

When the Huskies reported for the first team meeting to begin spring practice, they weren't greeted by X's and O's. They didn't get a video reliving last season's romp through November and December to their first bowl appearance in eight years. Instead, they saw coaches wearing hats and gear of the "Scholar-Baller." And they got fired up Monday when [Steve Sarkisian](#) and his staff started a position-by-position competition to see which group gets the highest grade-point average in 2011. "It's a very cool program," Sarkisian said this week after his third spring practice at UW began. "Our guys were excited about it when we introduced it to them. So we'll see how many 3.0s we get." Sarkisian is considering giving players who achieve a 3.0 this quarter a Scholar-Baller sticker with the program's "thinking man" logo to wear on the backs of their gold helmets during the season.

Dr. Keith Harrison, a former scholar athlete at West Texas A&M, founded the Scholar-Baller program while doing his doctoral dissertation in 1995, to address what he and his colleagues saw as a major disconnect between the educational, athletic and entertainment communities in the United States. Harrison developed a curriculum that studies a student athlete's place in society and then strives to bridge that societal gap between academics, athletics and entertainment. "I wanted to find an answer to the question, how do we retain high-profile student athletes?" Harrison said.

Essentially, Scholar-Baller seeks to make studying cool - as cool as scoring a touchdown in front of 70,000 cheering fans on a Saturday. The program is conducted with the support of the NCAA and gives caps, athletic gear, uniform patches and helmet stickers with the thinking-man logo on them as rewards for players achieving a 3.0 grade-point average, or for marked academic improvement during a season. "Student-athletes all grew up seeing themselves as 'ballers,'" said Kim Durand, UW's associate athletic director for student development and a friend of Dr. Harrison's since she met him at a conference in Orlando, Fla., in 1995. "This program is to show that the academic part is cool, too." Durand got Washington involved in 2005 as one of four NCAA charter schools in the Scholar-Baller program, along with Arizona State, Illinois State and Southeast Missouri State. The Huskies' women's basketball team has adopted the program the last two seasons, and this past quarter had six players achieve the goal of a 3.0 or greater GPA. Sarkisian heard about what the hoopsters were doing, then

invited Harrison to the UW football offices this winter to learn more about Scholar-Baller. "It was the funniest thing: After I was talking for about four or five minutes, he just says, 'Stop right there. We're doing it,'" Harrison said in a phone interview this week. "He said, 'This is another wrench.' He means it's another tool to validate the U-Dub football program academically." Sarkisian is just about Mr. Goodwrench in that regard, 26 months into his Huskies tenure.

The football team's GPA went up for the fifth consecutive academic term with UW's just-completed winter quarter. The team's latest cumulative GPA was 2.76, the highest Washington has on record for football. That dates to at least 2005. The culture of academic achievement has changed under Sarkisian, to the point Durand has noticed the players' dedication to their studies rarely wanes -- during the season, out of season, whether the coaches are checking up on them or are off campus recruiting. That's a credit to Sarkisian, his assistants and Durand's academic support staff of Kiaira Ladd, Rod Jones, Liberty Patos, Ink Aleaga, Pam Robenolt, and Lisa Bruce. They have created an environment perfectly suited for the Scholar-Baller program. Scholar-Baller has about 50 teams from around the country currently participating in its program, from the U.S. Military Academy's basketball and football teams at West Point to Butler's men's basketball team that is in its second consecutive Final Four this weekend, Florida's championship-contending football team, Grambling State's football team and Georgia Tech's football and basketball squads.

Harrison, the Scholar-Baller founder, has a special connection to UW through [Johnny Nansen](#). The Huskies' special-teams and defensive line coach was a former student of Harrison's at Washington State. Harrison, who got his doctorate in higher and post-secondary education from USC, is also familiar with Sarkisian and Huskies defensive coordinator [Nick Holt](#) from when those two coaches were on the Trojans staff through the 2008 season. "That's why this program is so hot with them," Harrison said. "We've had other schools do it, but not with as much enthusiasm as Sark's coaches, I must say." Sarkisian chuckled bashfully at that. "We have a firm belief in all three aspects of our guys' lives," the Huskies' coach said. "Obviously there is the football aspect of it. There's the academic aspect of it. And there's their personal and social world. "If we can continue to enhance their academic side, I think all three areas go hand in hand. When life is good - when we are playing good football, we're going well in school, we are getting things done in our personal lives - that's when our life as a football team is good. "So if I can continue to motivate them to do well in the classroom, and this is another unique way to do that, we are going to continue to try things like Scholar-Baller."