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Student Athlete

The large crowd of 110,000 people claps and cheers for their University of Michigan Wolverines as they run out into the field before the start of the football game. While most fans stand in their seats enjoying their weekly entertainment in the fall, the athletes on the field are hard at work. Once the game ends, the crowd pours out of the Big House to go party or get some homework done. The football players, on the other hand, must listen to the coach's post game talk and cool down before they can leave the stadium. When he's not at one of his five hour long practices or a game, watching film, or working out, Edwards is in the Stephen M. Ross Academic Center studying or getting homework done for tomorrow's classes where he usually stays until one in the morning before heading back to his room to get some sleep. For #27, defensive back Shakir Edwards, it's just another week in the life of a college athlete: "It does get pretty tiring at times because my day is already scheduled with class, practice, and studying, which means I really don't have much of a social life" (Edwards).

In my Sociology of Sport class, SM111, Edwards is an always vocal participant, eager to share his opinions on a daily basis whether the topic is college athletics, history of sport, or issues of gender and sexuality in sport. This class is comprised of a variety of sports fanatics whether they play varsity athletics here at U of M or just enjoy watching the game and playing recreationally. Against the normal stereotype of college athletes, I believe these individuals are student-athletes and not just simply athletes.

A common stereotype regarding college athletes is that they are using college as a way to boost themselves into their respective professional league. The University of Michigan has certainly sent many athletes to the NFL, NHL, and NBA such as Super Bowl

MVP Tom Brady (former U of M quarterback). Some of these athletes have used the University as a way to go pro, but many saw college as a valuable life experience and a way to earn an education. Former U of M goalie and current goaltender for the Dallas Stars, Marty Turco experienced the importance of academics firsthand. Towards the conclusion of the 1997-1998 regular season, Michigan was playing Michigan State University in one of the most important games of the season. When head coach Red Berenson discovered that his star senior goaltender was missing classes, he benched Turco in the big game after Turco refused to heed his warning (Herbert, *Making the Grade* pars. 41-43). U of M coaches like Berenson are important in maintaining academic success while playing at a high athletic level:

“For many coaches, this goes beyond public rhetoric and reflects their sense of personal responsibility for the total college experience of their student-athletes, not only athletic but academic and even social as well. Several of our Michigan coaches spend hours every week meeting one-on-one with each of their players to make sure they took their studies seriously” (Duderstadt 200).

Even with the benching, Turco encourages future U of M athletes to play college athletics all four years even if the professional leagues are knocking on their door. It seems that Jack Johnson has heeded Turco’s advice. The freshman defenseman was offered a \$850,000 per year contract for three years if he joined the Carolina Hurricanes (NHL) for their playoff run in 2006. Johnson turned down the offer because he wanted to remain in college for at least one more year. Against the get-rich-quick stereotype, Johnson decided to give college one more year instead of playing for a Stanley Cup contending team this playoff season (Dowd par. 2). These athletes realize the importance of becoming well-rounded individuals who succeed in athletics, academics, and other aspects of life.

While every university has a number of athletes who are strictly playing sports as a stepping-stone to the professional leagues, a majority of athletes will not make it onto higher levels of competition thus reinforcing the need to earn a worthwhile degree in college. In fact, a majority of the major college sports (basketball, football, soccer) offer a 2.0% chance or less of making it to their respective professional league. Only men's baseball and ice hockey boast of a higher college to pro percentage with 10.5% and 4.1% respectively ("Estimated Probability"). With those odds, it is no wonder that U of M athletes realize the importance of a college education. In 2003, the graduation rate among athletes at the University of Michigan was 20 points above the national average of 62 percent. Overall national graduation rates were a mere 60 percent (Stampfl pars. 4-5). These graduation rates among U of M athletes aren't highly publicized allowing popular stereotypes to remain in public opinion.

Among these common stereotypes is the one known as dumb jocks; people assume that athletes can only focus on their athletics while allowing their academics to slide. While one can certainly find some athletes who do slack off, there are many smart athletes who succeed academically at U of M: "I see most [football players] at the Academic Center, but there are always a few bad apples that make things seem bad" (Edwards). In fact, senior wide receiver and football team co-captain Jason Avant received the Academic All-Big Ten Team honor along with All-Big Ten first team and the 2005 ESPN The Magazine Academic All-American second team honors. The Academic All-Big Ten Team honor is given to athletes who have earned a varsity letter in "at least their second academic year at their institution and carry a career GPA of 3.0 or better" (Cossman pars. 1-2). 117 Michigan athletes earned this distinction between this academic year's fall and winter seasons including women's basketball, men's and women's gymnastics, men's and women's swimming and diving, wrestling, men's and

women's cross country, field hockey, football, men's and women's soccer, and volleyball (Cossman).

Some may question the achievements in academics listed above because a commonly held belief by U of M students is that college athletes take easy courses, especially by taking courses in the Division of Kinesiology. Even athletes like Larry Harrison, a Kinesiology freshman and football player, have to defend their academic achievements: "I study a lot. Maybe people see us as being nonchalant or not as stressed as everyone else, but school is pretty stressful" (Glupker pars. 6,8). The athletes mentioned in the previous paragraph succeeded academically in a variety of majors from Sports Management to Communications to Mathematics to Psychology to Mechanical Engineering to Biology. While 17 of those athletes may have received this honor as a Kinesiology student, it should not tarnish their academic efforts. The Division of Kinesiology used to be a place where U of M placed their top college athletes, which is why this stereotype arose. However, this is no longer the case today:

Over time this division developed highly respectable academic programs...The quality of students in these programs increased dramatically, to the point today where kinesiology has become one of the most competitive majors in the university for undergraduate admissions (Duderstadt 203).

U of M athletes in a variety of academic programs face discrimination as students who can't believe that these individuals can be talented on the field and in the classroom frequently label them "dumb jocks".

At my high school, we didn't see each other as dumb jocks. Our high school's motto was "Mens Sana in Corpore Sano," which means a sound mind in a sound body. Every single student was a student athlete, as we were required to play two sports every school year on top of a rigorous academic load. In my four years there, our school

won over 10 state titles in more than six different sports. Many of my friends received scholarships to play at places like Syracuse, Northwestern, Davidson, Stanford, Nebraska, and Cincinnati where they continue to succeed in academics and athletics. After having numerous varsity U of M athletes in many of my classes this year, I believe that Michigan has the same goal as my former high school: to make sure that the 700 athletes representing this fine University are strong students as well. Unfortunately, the media doesn't show this side of college athletes allowing the public to develop misconceptions.

Another popular belief is that U of M spends too much money on athletics and that revenue brought in from athletic events should be spent on strengthening the University in other areas such as research and academics. A common misconception among the public is that the University's football and basketball programs are big moneymakers. While U of M certainly generates seemingly high revenue from their athletics, usually around \$35 million per year, the athletic department is usually lucky to make a profit at the end of the year. Michigan is actually one of the few colleges to either break even or make a small profit while most universities lose money from their athletic programs. Contrary to popular belief, the academic budget and athletic budget for the University are separate from one another. The athletic department has managed to pay for itself over the past few years with the revenue generated by ticket and apparel sales as well as contracts with various television stations and Nike. The department's budget covers expenses for those in the athletic administration, coaching staff, student-athlete scholarships, travel, recruiting, public relations, maintenance, etc (Duderstadt 136).

Among these expenses is the one million dollars per year spent on academic support for U of M athletes. Michigan has ten full time staff members dedicated to

helping athletes achieve academic success. The University admits athletes who they feel can perform well academically if given proper support and help, but does not admit unqualified students. "Tutors, learning specialists and academic counselors – along with computers and places to read – are all available to athletes in need of assistance" (Herbert, *Making the Grade* pars. 6-8). The Academic Success Program (ASP) teaches student athletes how to manage their time during their freshman year by requiring at least eight hours per week at study table, "a time for student athletes to work on homework and receive tutoring," for at least eight hours per week (Glupker par. 4). After freshman year, the academic advisors don't require tutoring or study table unless they see the athlete struggling: "What 'struggling' means is up to the specific team – for football, it's a GPA below a 2.3; for women's basketball, it's anything below a 3.0" (Herbert, *Making the Grade* par. 15). Like all U of M students, Michigan athletes have to keep their GPA above a 2.0 or be at risk for academic probation or even expulsion. The athletes' academic advisors help them keep a GPA higher than a 2.0 as well as earn a college education.

Shari Aco, co-director of the ASP, meets with the football coaching staff every Monday to inform them if any of their athletes are skipping or failing a class as well as any other problems that may have occurred since the last meeting. Like other Michigan athletic/academic counselors, she sends the coaches grade reports of their athletes throughout the semester. Aco noticed that a lot of senior players would leave school after the conclusion of football season to prepare for the NFL so she helped design a program created to get as many seniors as possible to graduate in December before the bowl game. These two new schedules, one for redshirt athletes and those who don't redshirt, increased the number of football players who graduate from Michigan before heading to the NFL (Herbert, *Making the Grade* par. 37).

The University now has another way to help their athletes achieve academically through the new 40,000 square foot Stephen M. Ross Academic Center, which was opened for student athletes through a private donation of five million dollars along with other smaller private donations. The center has 70 computers in its lab, group study rooms, classrooms, fireplace, and casual study areas with comfortable chairs and flat screen televisions (Ungar pars. 2,6). When Bill Martin became the current Athletic Director, he was determined to get an academic center in place for Michigan's student athletes: "It was my first priority...I just found that all of our students, regardless of their academic progress, wanted a center where they could study with their fellow athletes, where they could have their own study halls" (Ungar pars. 20-21). Martin continues to look for ways to improve U of M's athletes' prowess in the classroom.

The public has the opinion that college athletes only have time for athletics while sometimes squeezing in academic work. Not only do U of M athletes succeed in both arenas, they are also involved in other extracurricular activities with two different student-athlete leadership groups, the Student-Athlete Advisory Council (SAAC) and the Michigan Peer Advisors Creating Trust (M-PACT). SAAC is a "NCAA mandated student-athlete organization which acts as the governing voice for all Michigan student-athletes" (M News pars. 2). Each varsity team has one voting representative, but the meetings are open to all student-athletes. M-PACT is a peer advising program designed to help student athletes overcome personal challenges. The organization is composed of student athletes who have either been nominated by their teammates or have volunteered. M-PACT members help address these personal challenges among their peers through a variety of activities and discussions. These issues include "alcohol and other drugs, sexual assault, depression, family stress, injuries, eating disorders, sexual orientation, grief and loss of others" (M News pars. 6-8). With these leadership groups, Michigan

athletes have a chance to make their voice heard in regards to their interests whether it's addressing a difficult challenge in a peer group (M-PACT) or mentioning problems in the department in SAAC meetings.

Aside from representing athletes and their interests, the student-athlete leadership group SAAC also "develops and promotes campus and community relations through volunteer activities and service projects" such as Kids Fair, Mock Rock, and Adopt-a-Family (M News par. 5). Mock Rock is a lighthearted event where jocks come together to sing and dance while raising money for C.S. Mott's Children's Hospital; in 2005, the event raised \$10,000 for the hospital (Colvin pars. 2,14). Another popular community service program among U of M student athletes is the From the Heart program, which unites U of M athletes and sick children at the C.S. Mott's Children's Hospital. With demanding practice schedules and academic load, these athletes put aside an hour and a half every week to go spend time with these kids on Thursday nights (Murray pars. 9,13). Drew Taylor, a fifth-year senior co-captain, is one of many athletes who look forward to this weekly event: "I love (visiting). I come back every week that I can and we don't have practice or an exam or anything that gets in the way. I just wish we could do it more, but they only have it set up for once a week" (Murray pars. 23-24). Unlike common stereotypes, U of M athletes are student-athletes who succeed athletically and academically and sometimes even in other extracurricular activities.

Former University of Michigan president James J. Duderstadt wrote in Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University regarding U of M student-athletes after graduation:

The value of athletics, when combined with commitment to receiving a quality college education, becomes all more apparent when meeting former Michigan

student-athletes who have gone on to great success – indeed leadership – in their careers as teachers, executives, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and even as president of the United States (190).

It was back in 1932-1934 when Gerald Ford, the 38th President of the United States, played as center and linebacker for the University of Michigan Wolverines football team. He was recently honored as the “14th most influential student-athlete in NCAA history” (Ablauf par. 1). If past U of M student-athletes have gone on to succeed in professional fields like law, medicine, and education, who’s to say the current student-athletes won’t surpass even these achievements and break down common stereotypes regarding college student-athletes in the process?

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