Villanova athletes display championship attitude in the classroom

BY SHAWN PROCTOR

The numbers—and the accolades—tell only part of the story of the Villanova Athletics' tradition. Twenty NCAA national team championships, More than 100 national titles in individual events. But those accomplishments merely hint at what defines the University's student-athletes: They strive and triumph just as much in the classroom as they do in sports competition.

It’s not surprising that in August Forbes named Villanova one of the top 25 colleges that dominate academically and athletically. The designation attests to the prestige of the Athletics Department’s academic accomplishments, now at an all-time high.

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The department’s dedication goes much deeper still. The Athletics leadership and staff support student-athletes as whole people, helping them reach their full potential.

“They are committed to helping you figure out who you want to be and help- ing you find balance between academics and athletics,” says Biology major Bella Burda ’19 CLAS, a member of the Cross Country and Track and Field teams. It’s a unique culture, she adds, which helps her excel in all facets of university life.

Last season, Bella was recognized with one of the premier academic honors in college sports: the Elite 90 Award, given by the NCAA to the student-athlete with the highest GPA who has made the finals in his or her sport. Bella is the second Villanovan to win the Elite 90 Award, and she’s just one of the University’s many athletes who have turned heads with stellar coursework.

BOOK-WISE, SPORTS-SMART

Director of Athletics Mark Jackson expects the tradition of achievement at Villanova to continue—and to elevate to new heights. “We strive to develop complete student-athletes, and we are succeeding,” he says. “We are succeeding academically. We are succeeding athletically. We are succeed- ing in providing a life-changing college experience.”

Faculty Representative to Athletics Jeremy Kees, PhD, the Richard J. and Barbara Naclerio Endowed Chair in Business, feels this exceptional performance in all areas makes Villanova a distinctive presence in college sports. “As a former student-athlete, I understand the chal- lenge facing our coaches, staff, faculty and student-athletes,” he says. “Villanova has set the bar very high for academics and athletics. But our student-athletes continue to achieve greatness because everyone works together toward one goal.”

Whether they need guidance navigat- ing a challenging major’s curriculum; finding the right study abroad, research or internship opportunity; or simply scheduling classes, Brophy and her team help student-athletes have a complete col- lege experience at Villanova.

“Whatever their goals are, we are going to help our students achieve them,” she says.

HUMBLE, HUNGRY

Allison Venella ’08 CLAS, ’13 MA, director of Student-Athlete Development, says that technology has made checking in with student-athletes easier, especially when the team is traveling.

The academic support system has been streamlined and moved online. These changes allow students and staff to communicate from anywhere, access progress reports for classes and schedule tutoring sessions. Programs like this support the culture of excellence at Villanova, which is distinctive and unchanging. It is also among the reasons Villanova attracts student-athletes from all over the world and from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

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JENNIFER BROPHY, DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT FOR ATHLETICS

“The history and tradition of Villanova Athletics couple academics and athletics as dual priorities. The approach evolves over time, absolutely, but those core values have been and will always be there,” Venella says.

Although there were fewer formal- ized support structures during her time, former player Rosemarie T. Dempsey ’83 VSB says that Harry Perretta ’95 MA, head coach, Women’s Basketball, and the Athletics staff nurtured the student-athletes, from finding a compatible major to connecting with alumni.

“Harry and the coaches were the catalysts in helping the athletes balance sports and academics,” Dempsey says. “They understood each person’s strengths and helped all of us move forward.”

Berkeley, Calif., native Dominique Clark ’18 CLAS had looked at many
“Everyone made it clear that if I was struggling in any respect—be it academically, athletically or socially—I could go to them for help,” Andreas says. Throughout his time at Villanova, coaches, teammates and academic support staff have regularly reached out and, when needed, connected Andreas with resources such as tutors. That support has continued as he prepares to launch his career. Staff in the Athletics Department have helped him refine his resume and connected Andreas with alumni working in the mechanical engineering field.

Brophy says that Villanova is one of the few schools where students like Andreas and Snyder can compete at the highest level in their chosen sport and still take on a demanding curriculum like engineering or nursing whose schedule may be less flexible.

“Villanova’s culture of collaboration and commitment to students helps make it possible,” she says.

Jackson agrees with Brophy—Villanovans prove they are stronger together. That unity draws on powerful Augustinian ideals and fosters champion athletes, as well as exceptional students. Bound together, driven to always greater heights, Villanovans achieve ever more.

“This is a tight-knit community. Students don’t just come to Villanova for four years. This is a decision that lasts a lifetime,” he says.

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