

# THE WINNING COMBINATION:

## *Liberal Arts and the D-III Student-Athlete*

Back in the fall of 1979 a relatively poor student-athlete from the cornfields of Pickaway County headed off to attend Ohio Wesleyan University along with rich kids from all over creation. That young man was of course me.

I always did my best in classes and I was a curious young man, especially in the area of history. From a young age I knew that I was going to college and that higher education was important. However, above all things, I loved football and was not willing to give it up. Sport taught me how to get clobbered, get up, analyze what had just happened, and do better next time. Undersized (5'9" and 160 pounds) and moderately slow (4.99 seconds for the 40-yard dash with wind assistance), I loved to tackle and could outwork anyone if I put my mind to it. Add to that the many years of tag-team physical and mental torment from my older brothers and I was a tough little dude.

However, toughness doesn't draw great attention (compared to impressive speed or size) thus I recruited the OWU football coach. He wasn't that impressed, but I was accepted into school and received a great financial aid package due to the fact that President Carter was investing in education instead of building up an arsenal of Cold War weapons.

As a first-generation college student from the boonies, I thought being "rich" meant that you owned two nice cars at the same time. I was clueless about the upper crust and thus fully unprepared for the cultural shift I was about to experience. As a high school student I always wanted to earn high grades, but I usually took interesting courses instead of the pre-packaged college preparatory curriculum. My most meaningful classes/activities were woodshop, bachelor living, advanced foods, yearbook, remedial English, geometry, and, of course, sports. Suffice it to say, this laissez-faire approach did not prepare me for the high-caliber, liberal arts challenge ahead.

Having earned notable recognition as a high school student-athlete, I was not without self-confidence, but everyone at OWU was smart and no one really cared that I played football. Our Battling Bishops team took five games to finally score that season and I wasn't even good enough to make the travel team. In fact, I was so undervalued that they gave me faded pink game pants (previously white), a poorly fitting helmet, and the pleasurable opportunity to play scout team tailback. All in all, it was an extremely humbling experience.

In my freshman residence hall many of the rich boys were getting drunk, tearing up the place, and continually blabbering on and on about their impressive families, towns, and accomplishments. They were primarily concerned with self-promotion and social status. As a country kid, I had nothing to tell them, nothing to



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prove, and, frankly, I didn't like them. On the academic side, I was required to take French, art history, music appreciation, philosophy, and more writing classes than you could shake a stick at. If my parents had owned a farm, I'm pretty sure I would have left to live off the land.

Then a couple of *tipping points* occurred that helped me to better appreciate my new situation. The first was during a free writing exercise in my introductory composition class. We were instructed to write for 10 minutes and simply pull the reader into our fictional setting. I wrote about hiding in a tree after running from a tribe of fierce cannibals and reflecting on how I had gotten myself into such a mess. The story was kind of stupid and fun to think about and, frankly, I had nothing more significant to say. The professor was an intimidating man, with a habit of peering critically at us over his spectacles. After collecting the writings, he shocked me by selecting mine to read aloud because it was vivid,

interesting, and wasn't meant to impress anyone. He actually stated that my writing was both creative and entertaining and I was left dumbfounded by this unexpected compliment. How could any of the above be true when these rich kids were so obviously superior to me?

Another transformational moment came after I pledged to the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity and, as a result, was dragged out of my introverted shell. We were in the depths of initiation week, and the fraternity members were giving us a pretty hard time. Back in high school I was always the player that looked out for the younger guys and thus was not inclined to tolerate such abuse. I called my fellow pledges into the cleaning closet—our only available hideout—and proposed a walk out. I quickly had half of them convinced by my simple yet truthful logic that the upperclassmen needed us more than we needed them. Even though my proposed strike was voted down, the developing leader within me had clearly communicated that we lowly pledges had authentic power and voice despite the fact that we were treated as if we were the scum of the Earth.

*So now . . . what does this essay have to do with D-III athletics and the liberal arts?*

My answer is that this wonderful, if idiosyncratic, combination of learning experiences often “flies under the radar” but nevertheless has great potential to mold ordinary young people into leaders that are willing to take chances, be judged, and handle both failure and success with dignity and humility.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines an athlete as “a person who is trained in or good at sports, games, or

exercises that require physical skill and strength.” I believe the two inherent flaws in this definition are the criterion of being “good” and the limitation of athleticism to “physical skill and strength.” I would propose that being an athlete is simply making a commitment to train for any movement-based activity and following through with that dedicated regimen in order to achieve an individual level of excellence. The true essence of D-III athletics is clearly stated by the NCAA in that “Division III affords student-athletes the opportunity to discover valuable lessons in teamwork, discipline, perseverance, and leadership, which in turn make student-athletes better students and responsible citizens.”

Regarding the Liberal Arts, Wikipedia—yes, dreaded by professors everywhere—defines such an education as “aiming to impart a broad general knowledge and develop general intellectual capacities, in contrast to a professional, vocational, or technical curriculum.”

The complementary fit between D-III athletics and the liberal arts is likely due to the fact that our American educational system is historically based on dealing with the human dilemma of *Dualism*. Dualism proposes that the separate human components of the “mind” (cognitive) and the “body” (psychomotor) must be connected (balanced) in order to achieve one's human potential.

From Plato to Descartes this theory has been discussed, debated, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Now, with the widespread acceptance of Benjamin Bloom's three

domains of learning (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor) there is little left to debate regarding the great potential benefit of movement-based learning activities. It can therefore be assumed that higher education should strive to develop *balanced* individuals, merging the mind and the body, and that the D-III athletics model combined with a liberal arts curriculum is an optimal learning environment.

Most D-III student-athletes are very much like I was in that they are physically limited but passionate about their sport. Such student-athletes, faced with similar challenges, are then able to experience exceptional character development, allowing ordinary D-III student-athletes to become extraordinary examples of human potential.

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*(Editor's note: This is the second in a series of articles written by Defiance College faculty to explore the liberal arts.)*