Recruiting Diversity
Student-Athletes from Different Backgrounds Find ‘Second Family’ at WSU

Jose Cardosa is an imposing figure. Six-foot-three, 320 pounds. Long, curly dark hair. A right hand that swallows yours whole when you meet. He is, literally, a big man on campus. He’s also homesick.

“Nothing has been leaving home and living away from my family,” said Cardosa, a junior center on the football team who arrived in Ogden last fall from Santa Ana, Calif. “I wasn’t used to taking care of myself.”

Each year, WSU Athletics is on a mission: to find and recruit the highest-quality student-athletes to the university. Although many recruits come from within Utah, coaches also travel beyond the state’s borders to speak with young men and women from all kinds of environments and backgrounds.

While college life is an adjustment for any incoming student, especially student-athletes who have both academics and athletics to worry about, the acclimation can be hardest for student-athletes of color who have arrived at this predominantly white university, in a state where 85 percent of the residents are white.

“I feel a little different, being here,” Cardosa said. “Coming from California, where there are so many mixed cultures, this has been kind of difficult.”

Academic coordinator Korla Woods says those feelings are common for minority student-athletes. “When you’re in a foreign land, it takes a while to learn the customs and language,” he said. “For most of our kids from a different ethnic background, there is an adjustment period.”

Kandice Golar, senior goalie for the women’s soccer team, was used to standing out in her high school before coming to WSU. “I was one of only five black girls—so I was already used to this kind of environment,” she said. But, coming from a Chicago suburb, there were still big differences. “Going to Salt Lake City, which is so diverse, was strange. Figuring out where to get my hair done, and everything being closed on Sundays—I wasn’t used to that.”

Golar hasn’t faced any racist experiences while at WSU, but, she said, “There’s some ignorance and discomfort—you can see it and feel it. It’s mostly things like people staring, and you can tell they’re thinking, ‘What is she doing here?’”

Lynzell Jackson, a senior wide receiver from Tempe, Ariz., said he has faced racism during his time at the university. “I’ve definitely run into it at Weber State, more than I would like to say. There have been times where people don’t want to help me or don’t want to speak with me because I’m black or I’m a male or whatever the case may be. But there’s not a whole lot you can do about it.”

Athletic director Jerry Graybeal said there are times when the department deals with student-athletes—and even coaches—who have been victims of racial tension. The department approaches the issue as openly and supportively as possible.

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Diversity Events  
Spring 2006

The Diversity Center presents a variety of events to promote diversity at WSU. Events at the center are held between 11 a.m. - 2 p.m. on the dates listed; for actual times call 626-6379 two to three days before the event. Contact Keith Wilder (626-6379, kwilder@weber.edu) for more information on these or other programs.

COMMON GROUND: Enjoy an atmosphere of inclusion during this forum focusing on resources for education and information about diversity. Snacks are served and feedback is encouraged. Feb. 8, March 22, April 4

TASTE FOR DIVERSITY: Expose yourself to a diverse world of food, dance and art. Feb. 13, March 2.

SESSIONS@UB240: Share your music, art, poetry and history during your lunch hour in a coffeehouse-like setting. Snacks, beverages and interesting discussion provided. March 8.

STOP THE HATE: Participate in this national program to spread information about eliminating hate and hate crimes, and furthering zero-tolerance initiatives. Feb. 22: Hate-crimes bill speaker; March 27: Make a Statement Day; April 13: Day of Silence.

LEARN TO LISTEN: Learn about diverse issues and listen to a variety of beliefs, ideas and viewpoints. Feb. 28, April 28.

JUMP START: Mentor inner-city students in this after-school program. Call for schedule.

Other Events

Feb. 13-17: African-American Emphasis Week
Feb. 27-March 3: Hispanic Emphasis Week
March 27-31: International Violence Week
April 10-14: Holocaust Display

WEB ADDRESSES

The Diversity Center:  
www.weber.edu/Diversity  
Services for Students with Disabilities:  
www.weber.edu/ssd
Services for International Students:  
www.weber.edu/sis
Services for Multicultural Students:  
www.weber.edu/sms
Nontraditional Student Center:  
www.weber.edu/nontrad
Services for Women Students:  
www.weber.edu/sws

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"You don’t sweep it under the rug,” he said. “You ultimately aren’t going to solve the problem, but you’re going to help the individual deal with their feelings and make sure you let them know we’re going to investigate and be proactive about this and there’s going to be some closure to this. We don’t just leave it hanging.”

Graybeal said one of the strongest support groups a student-athlete can turn to is the athletic department, which serves as an extended family. “If you think we’ve done a really good job over the years fostering that environment,” he said. “The coach will invest in the athletic and academic development of our student-athletes. We also want to create a social atmosphere for them that will help them succeed on the playing field and in the classroom.

For minority student-athletes, this “focus on the family” can help them feel at home here. “The people around me made it easier to adjust,” Graybeal said. “You find friends on your team. The other teams help too—there are other black students and Hispanic students. There is a family feel.”

“My friends here are like my family,” Cardozo said. “We’re really close, and that makes me feel better every day.”

Jackson said he has met many people who helped him or given him a shoulder to lean on. “Coach Mac (Ron McBride) and his wife Vicki was away from my family and they took me really well, which I needed,” he said. “It’s been people like that who have kept me sane.”

There are ways for WSU’s faculty, staff and students to help foster the inclusive environment addressed in the university’s diversity initiative, Graybeal said. The simplest way is by just getting to know the student-athletes.

“Just be up front and honest with them,” he said. “Be as vocal with them in person as you are when you’re rooting for them at a game. Communicate in dialogue. Make them aware of your world and where you come from. Share your experiences with them.

“And I know it’s a two-way street. I want our student-athletes to do the same thing, and engage with others instead of trying to fly under the radar.” Graybeal said he has seen this kind of interaction increase in his seven years at WSU.

Cardozo would like to see more faces like his at Weber—more people of color at Weber—it would feel like home,” he said. “And people should talk to us. No matter how big we are, or how dark we are, don’t be afraid to approach us.”

- Jennifer Philion, University Communications
‘Honorary Coach’ Program a Bridge to Faculty, Staff

At each home football game, there is an extra coach on the sidelines. While this coach may not be calling plays or counseling athletes, he or she is an integral part of the team.

“Our ‘honorary coach’ program serves two very important purposes,” said Steve Correa, assistant academic coordinator in WSU Athletics. “It’s a way for us to engage and educate faculty and staff members, and it also allows us to recognize them, and the work they do with us, in front of the rest of the WSU community.”

In the program, a faculty or staff member who works closely with student-athletes is selected to be an honorary coach. Correa said he’ll ask student-athletes to name people across the campus who have been the most helpful, trying to find “behind the scenes” employees such as advisors or student services staff as well as professors, deans and administrators.

The “coach” and a guest are invited to attend a pre-game brunch, tour the facilities, and meet the players, coaches and athletic director. During the game, they watch from the sidelines and are introduced over the public address system.

“For faculty or staff members who didn’t play sports, it’s hard for them to understand what a student-athlete goes through—all the rigors behind the scenes, how they prepare for a game,” Correa said. “This is a chance for them to see our side of things—a great way to bridge the gap. It’s been very successful, and we’re very proud of the program.”

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Student-Athletes Connect Through Community Involvement

WSU football players and head coach Ron McBride lead West Haven Elementary School students in a cheer during “Read Across America” day last spring.

Hammering nails for a Habitat for Humanity project, reading to elementary school children and visiting the Boys & Girls Clubs of Ogden are all worthwhile activities. Fitting them into a student-athlete’s busy schedule, however, is no easy task. Yet that’s what every sports team at WSU does each year.

One of the ways that WSU Athletics organizes projects is through the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC). SAAC has two goals: first, to give student-athletes a place to voice their concerns about issues they face, and second, to organize community service involvement. Each team has a SAAC representative who reports to the committee what projects the team is working on. Heather Balli, a junior on the women’s golf team and this year’s SAAC president, enjoys the community involvement.

“Getting involved with the community projects has given me a lot of pride in Weber and the area,” Balli said. “I’m grateful for the opportunity to come here and get to know a lot of great people.”

Balli, who comes to Ogden from Littleton, Colo., said she particularly enjoys the activities that allow her to work with youth.

“When I was a kid I always looked up to college athletes and wanted to do what they’re doing,” Balli said. “Doing this lets me connect with kids who have that same goal.”

Kandice Golar, a senior goalie on the women’s soccer team from Illinois, also enjoys projects with children. “Little kids look up to us,” Golar said. “We’re role models; we set an example for these kids.”

One of the projects the entire department gets involved in each year is Dr. Seuss day. On March 2, student-athletes visit local schools and read Dr. Seuss books to elementary students in commemoration of Seuss’ birthday.

“You ought to see how the kids light up when the student-athletes come in,” said Jerry Graybeal, director of intercollegiate athletics.

Graybeal is proud of the athletes who willingly give of their time to benefit the community. “For student-athletes, just their athletic requirements in a day are a huge commitment,” he said. “Couple that with an academic load, and it’s a long day for them. So finding an hour or two here and there to get out in the community can be difficult. But they answer the call.”

This spring, SAAC is planning on spending a Saturday assisting Habitat for Humanity in building a home in the area. The department participated in the project two years ago with approximately 150 athletes, coaches and staff members pitching in.

“We’re not just athletes playing our sports,” Golar said. “We can do other things to help people.”

Community involvement works both ways. Wiley King, a senior football and track star from Portland, Ore., thinks it helps the community connect more to the athletes as well. “I still see lots of kids at the mall who I worked with in National Youth Sports Program last summer. They come up to me and say hi,” said King, a wide receiver on the football team and sprinter on the track team. “I’m glad they feel that we’re friends.”

Graybeal thinks that the university couldn’t ask for better representatives. “I believe our student-athletes are our best ambassadors,” he said. “They showcase everything that happens at the university.”

Sarah Adams, SAAC advisor and compliance coordinator, echoes Graybeal’s feelings. “It’s good for them to be role models,” Adams said. “Anytime you have the opportunity to be a good influence, that’s very worthwhile.”

- Travis Clemens, University Communications
Academics & Athletics: A Challenging Combination

Imagine waking up at 5:30 a.m. to be at the gym by 6. After a strenuous workout, you head to an 8 a.m. class. Until noon or 1 p.m., you’re in class. Lunchtime. At 2 p.m., it’s time for practice. When you get out at 6 p.m., you head to study table until 8:30. You’re hungry—time to grab dinner. Then it’s back to the books, and you’d better get to bed at a reasonable time, because you’re doing it all again tomorrow.

Such is the life of a Weber State University football player. And all of the nearly 300 student-athletes at WSU, regardless of sport, face similarly demanding schedules. Sometimes those demands, such as having to miss class to travel to games, can put a strain on their relationships with faculty members.

“The average student or average faculty or staff member has no idea how rigorous and demanding a student-athlete’s schedule can be,” said Korla Woods, academic coordinator for WSU Athletics. Woods and his assistant, Steve Correa, are responsible for making sure student-athletes stay on track academically.

That task involves constant communication, with student-athletes and also with the faculty and staff members who work with them. Communication, they tell the student-athletes, is the key to your success at WSU.

“The most important thing for student-athletes to do is to establish a line of communication with their professors and always have it open,” Woods said. “We also emphasize their responsibilities as students: going to class every day, sitting in front of the class, being respectful. If you have a question, don’t be afraid to ask.”

“And always remember that the professor is your ally, not your adversary. No one’s here to see you fail.”

Working Relationship

Jose Cardoza, a junior who plays center on the football team, has felt that support in his physical education studies. “Some professors understand how hard it is to be a student-athlete,” he said. “If you get behind, they give you a chance to catch up. In my program, a lot of the teachers played sports. They know how hard we train and how much time we put into it. They’re really good about working with you on the side. If you ask for help, they’ll help you,” he said.

“Most of my professors seemed to like the fact that they had a student-athlete in their class,” said senior computer science major Kandice Golar, goalie for the women’s soccer team. “A lot of them support the athletic program.”

Occasionally, though, student-athletes and their professors can reach an impasse over missed classes, test-taking or other academic issues. Woods and Correa counsel their students to try to resolve problems on their own—but they’ll step in to mediate if necessary.

“If a professor has blatantly refused to work with you, and you’ve gone to office hours, you’ve tried to open a conversation, and you’re still not getting anywhere, that’s where Steve or I might speak with the professor to get their opinion on what’s happening,” Woods said.

Seeing Both Sides

Bruce Handley, professor and chair in the business administration department and chair of the faculty senate, is also a former Weber State football player.

“Student-athletes should enjoy all the same rights and bear the same responsibilities as their fellow students,” he said. Handley cited section 4-22 of WSU’s Policies & Procedures Manual on dealing with students representing WSU (at right), saying it’s a logical way to deal with the responsibilities of student-athletes.

He also offered some tips from his own playing days: “It was often difficult to study during trips, between the combination of travel and getting mentally prepared for the game,” he said. “I learned very early to do my academic preparation in advance of those trips, and to register for classes to reduce my academic load during the peaks of athletic activity.

“I really did not expect nor want my professors to treat me any differently than my fellow students. My students who are athletes seem to feel the same way.”

Golar agreed with this opinion, but said that a certain degree of understanding is always nice. “I’m not saying student-athletes need special privileges, but it can be hard to do everything,” she said.

Putting the Pieces Together

Overall, the perspective in WSU Athletics is that the university’s faculty and staff are a tremendous help in supporting student-athletes. “I’ve always been very impressed, because I think they do a good job of keeping a real connection with the kids,” said athletic director Jerry Graybeal.

Woods and Correa agree. “In my three years here, I’ve run into very few faculty members who have not been willing to work with us,” Woods said. “Even if they may have had a negative attitude toward athletics or a particular student, once we’ve had the opportunity to open up discussion, there have been very few instances where we didn’t walk away with a positive resolution.”

“That’s why we’re all in education,” said Correa. “We care about the students; we care about these young men and women, and we want them to succeed.”

Faculty or staff members with questions about working with student-athletes are encouraged to contact Korla Woods at 626-7417 or kwood@weber.edu.

Jennifer Phillion, University Communications