

Ahead of the Game

Canisius student-athletes
demonstrate there's more to
winning than points scored



Whether you're comparing wins or losses, tournament appearances or championships, most college sports fans tabulate their school's success by numbers. No doubt, winning records and power rankings score points among potential student-athlete recruits but the scoreboard is no longer the sole measure of a successful athletic program.

Instead, today's student-athletes are interested in an athletic program that is equally committed to their performances both on and off the court. They want the same academic, social and community experiences as non-athletes.

These needs were made clear to the college's Athletics Department in spring 1999, when seniors completed the NCAA-required 'exit interview,' which evaluates the overall college experience had by student-athletes.

"At the end of the exit interview we asked student-athletes if they had to do it all over again at Canisius, would they choose 'yes,'" states Jennifer Zeh, senior associate athletic director. "At that time, the majority of student-athletes were saying 'no.'"

Since that survey, the Athletics Department put a game plan in place to address very specific needs of student-athletes. At the heart of that plan is the NCAA CHAMPS Life Skills program, which the college implemented in fall 2000. Referred to on campus as G.R.I.E.F.S (Greater Resources Instrumental for Future Success) Life Skills, the program is designed to support student-athlete development in five major areas.

"The NCAA provides us with instructional materials and supplemental resources that support student-athlete development in academics, athletics, community service, personal development and career development," explains Zeh.

Keeping up academically can be the most difficult for the 364 student-athletes at Canisius. For many, it is a continual challenge to balance schoolwork with team

commitments, which require daily practices and out-of-town games. Add the responsibilities of extra-curricular activities, a part-time job or volunteer work and the balancing act becomes even more difficult.

"The hardest part about being a student-athlete is simply having no time," says **Bianca Fragomeni '03**. "There are a lot of occasions when I have to tell friends I can't do something or go somewhere because I have practice, a club meeting or studying to do."

The distance/freestyle swimmer juggles a full course load with two practices a day. In addition, she is a committee member for the Student Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), president of the Association for Women in Communications, a member of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) and the American

Advertising Federation on campus, a sports writer for *The Griffin*, and an active service volunteer with Campus Ministry. Still, the communications major manages to maintain a 3.88 GPA.

"My school work doesn't suffer at all because the Athletics Department does an excellent job of helping student-athletes keep up with their studies," says Fragomeni.

In a joint effort with the Office of Academic Advisement, the Athletics Department regularly monitors the academic progress of student-athletes. Halfway through each semester, the department receives progress reports on all athletes. If students demonstrate poor performances or miss classes, they are withheld from team practices or in some instances, competition. If necessary, students are also assigned a tutor or scheduled to meet with the athletic academic counselor – the newest addition to the athletics roster.

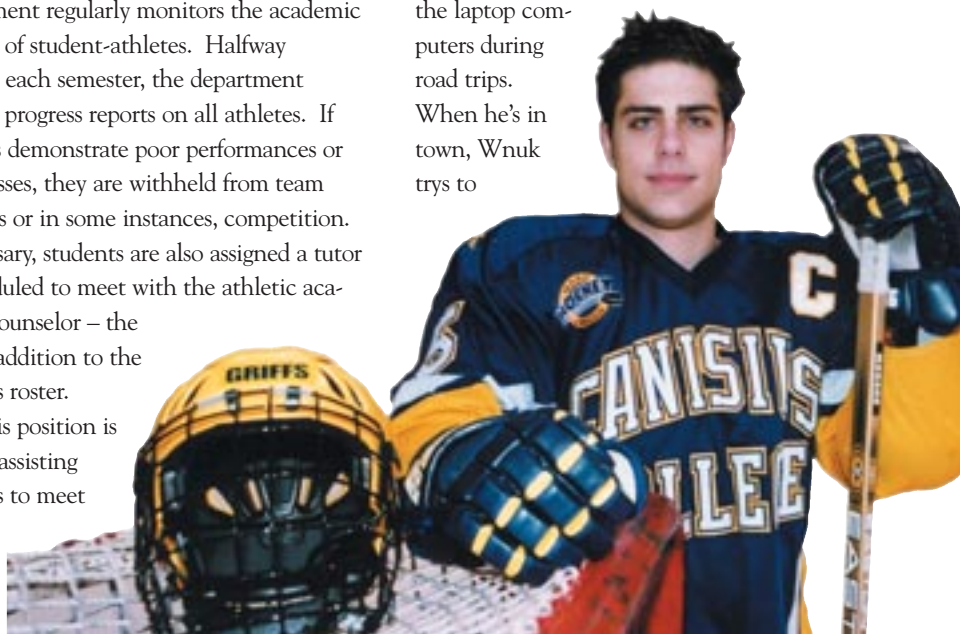
"This position is vital in assisting athletics to meet

the ever-changing needs of our student-athletes," explains Zeh. "The counselor meets, on a regular basis, with any student-athlete who is experiencing academic difficulties. He is also someone to whom the students can turn to when they're looking for direction. Depending on their individual needs, the counselor knows where to send students for help on campus.

As co-captain of the women's swim team, Fragomeni can recall occasions when she referred younger teammates to the new academic counselor. She has also encouraged freshman athletes to take advantage of the department's tutorial services, CHAMPS Corner, and laptop computers.

"When I first came on campus, student-athletes didn't have their own tutorial services center. Now they do. There's also the CHAMPS room, which has computers, printers, TVs and VCRs. So if you have to be at the Koessler for a lot of practices or classes, you have a quiet place to do your school work and you don't have to walk across campus to the library or back to your room." Fragomeni adds, "We didn't have the laptop computers when I started here either. The laptops are a huge help because we can do homework, hand in papers or E-mail professors while on the road."

Tom Wnuk '03, co-captain of the Golden Griffin hockey team, is another big fan of the Athletics Department's initiatives. The defenseman, who is a three-time member of the MAAC All-Academic Team and a former nominee for MAAC Student-Athlete of the Year, frequently uses the laptop computers during road trips. When he's in town, Wnuk tries to



attend the new guest lecture series, which brings in speakers to discuss everything from eating disorders, to alcohol abuse to how student-athletes can stay focused.

“When it comes to grades, I’ve learned you just have to set high standards for yourself and stick to them,” he says.

Wnuk’s high scores off the ice (3.86 GPA) have also earned this accounting major membership into Chi Sigma Alpha, the new national student-athlete honor society on campus, and attendance at the Student-Athlete Academic Banquet, which annually honors athletes who achieve a 3.2 GPA or higher during the previous semester. In addition, Wnuk serves as treasurer of the Accounting Society, and is a member of Alpha Sigma Nu, the Jesuit honor society; and Beta Gamma Sigma, the national business/management honor society. Somewhere in between his 12 to 15 hour day, which also includes a part-time job, Wnuk makes time to volunteer in the local community.

“Last year, the hockey team visited an elementary school and read books to the little kids. This year, the team collected money and bought food for the people at St. Ann’s Parish,” recalls Wnuk. “It’s important to see the other side and give back because we don’t always realize how lucky we are.”

This type of service work enables student-athletes to make meaningful contributions to the community and support the college’s mission. And although only SAAC members are required to participate in service work under the CHAMPS program, Zeh says most teams organize their own community service projects.

“Many times, the individual teams approach us when they have a volunteer idea,” says Zeh. “We believe this reflects on the success of the college’s mission, which is to develop the entire person. And so we encourage such activities whenever time permits and help provide students with opportunities to do so.”

Encouraging and supporting the needs of student-athletes is an on-going effort by the athletics team, which relies heavily on the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee for feedback. The committee is made up of one



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— Janel Stevens '04

student-athlete representative from each team and meets once a month to discuss new ways to promote the college’s athletic program, academic services and community involvement.

“We talk about things that are going on around campus. We talk about the issues that student-athletes have, whether it’s the locker rooms, equipment or the team,” explains **Janel Stevens '04**, junior guard on the women’s basketball team.

Stevens currently leads the team in points scored this season, with 421 points in 18 games. As of January, her 23.4 point-per-game average ranks her first in the MAAC and ninth in the nation for scoring. Most recently, Stevens netted 36 points and 16 rebounds against Niagara – both career highs for the Freeport, NY native.

Off the court, this business/management major with a 3.48 GPA plays an equally important role as vice president of SAAC. In her position, Stevens is helping to further enhance the services available to student-athletes.

“We bring the ideas and needs that we hear from student-athletes to (Athletics Director) Tim Dillon or Jennifer Zeh and they help us implement them,” explains Stevens.

Many of the ideas discussed at these meetings result in the development of new student-athlete programs or services. For example, when junior and senior athletes expressed concern over how to obtain an internship, write a resume and conduct themselves on interviews, it prompted the idea of creating a *Career Playbook*.

“Our number one goal is to provide for student welfare and help develop well-rounded student-athletes who have a sense of leadership, loyalty and service,” says Zeh. “The *Career Playbook* was just one more way for the Athletics Department to meet the ever-changing needs of our student-athletes.” And it appears to be paying off. Since fall 2000, when the CHAMPS Life Skills program was implemented on campus, the student-athlete GPA has averaged 3.0 or higher. Last year, 93 student-athletes earned MAAC All-Academic Honors. And this spring, 129 student-athletes will be honored at the athletics academic banquet, for maintaining a 3.2 cumulative GPA. (That’s about one in every three student-athletes.) Most importantly, when asked if they had to do it all over again at Canisius, student-athletes are answering with a resounding ‘yes.’

“It used to be that students came to Canisius because they liked the school. Once they were here, they decided to try out for an athletic team,” explains Zeh. “Now, we have many more recruited student-athletes and it has a lot to do with all the services we offer, like the academic counselor, the CHAMPS Corner, the laptops, the SAAC committee and academic banquets. A lot of other schools don’t offer these things. So we’re recruiting better student-athletes and in turn, we’re improving our entire program – athletically.” ■