

SG to DR

By, Casey Contres

Four years ago, Joe Rocco walked the halls of Northern Cambria High School as a recognizable face, but a quiet, reserved person.

Three years ago, Joe Rocco walked onto the IUP campus an unknown to everyone, including the basketball team he contributes greatly to now.

Two months ago Joe Rocco, walked onto IUP campus, as one of its most recognizable student figures, for his success on the basketball team and his tremendous achievements as a student-athlete, with emphasis on the word student.

Rocco has shown a large amount of determination to achieve extremely high goals while overcoming some odds along the way.

Basketball stars are not supposed to be doctors. And doctors are not supposed to be basketball stars, but that doesn't faze him from doing both.

Most people who know Rocco are not surprised with his academic success. He was his high school's valedictorian.

"Joe has always taken everything he does very seriously, school most importantly," said his sister and fellow IUP student, Christy Rocco.

People probably aren't surprised with his athletic success either. He scored over 1,000 points and won a Heritage Conference Title at Northern Cambria.

“Joe became so good because he worked hard in high school,” said former teammate and fellow IUP student Stephen Ashurst. “He almost became frustrating to practice with, because his intensity was always so high.”

What surprises people is his ability to do both at such an extremely high level. Joe has taken on the daunting task of contributing to the No. 2 basketball team in the country’s Division II last year while receiving only one B in his college career and maintaining a 3.99 GPA in pre-med.

“I always knew Joe was an incredible athlete and extremely smart,” said his sister. “But if you would have told me my freshman year at IUP that my brother would be this well-known throughout campus, I never would've believed you.”

His basketball career at IUP almost never happened. Because he came from a small school and is undersized by Division II standards, he wasn’t recruited. He attended IUP’s walk-on tryouts before the 2007 season started. He was the only one that really stood out at the tryout and Head Coach Joe Lombardi offered him a spot on the roster just for that season. Lombardi told him they only needed him for one year and that his spot would be taken by a recruit the next season.

“I took that as motivation to work harder,” said Rocco. “And at the end of the year coach told me I earned a spot and he would love for me to be on the team for my whole career.”

From the time Joe became a member of the basketball team and started to enter his pre-med classes, he has undergone one of the toughest and most time-consuming college experiences of anyone enrolled at IUP. Joe admits what he has done since he’s been at IUP is not easy. He

sacrifices a lot of the social opportunities that makes college the experience it is for many. He hasn't really been able to sit back, relax and enjoy himself.

While the rest of the team is resting up on an off-day he will be found in the lab working on research, such as a recently published article he co-authored on Tuberculosis Mycobacterium Avium.

“Yeah that’s a little more confusing than breaking down a 2-3 zone.”

Ironically, Rocco credits basketball for his good grades. His expectations are so high for himself on the court that he naturally puts the same expectations on himself for school. A lot of student-athletes struggle with the student part, but Joe says basketball has enabled him to do even better in the classroom.

“Basketball is an essential part of me being such a good student,” said Rocco. “It helps me reach a different potential.”

He feels that all of the pressure it brings only helps calm him during tough times academically. The more one talks with the Joe, the quicker they see that he is rarely all that challenged academically. He'll be the first to tell you that making it onto the team was harder than winning The Elite 88 award, which is given to only one Division II basketball player every year for their academic achievements. His future may consist of cancer research or open heart surgery, but he feels that covering a guy like Pitt's LeVance Fields or Syracuse's Eric Devendorf is a much more difficult task.

Joe has recently applied to medical schools, including Johns Hopkins, Pennsylvania, Pitt and Maryland. Rocco, however, is more worried about raising his free throw percentage or adding another inch to his vertical than interviewing for medical school.

“There are times I have asked myself why am I doing this,” said Rocco. “I get overwhelmed, but I find a way to get through it. The challenge has been tough; it has been a lot of non-stop work. “

“I’ve written a lot of papers on the busses going to games, and if I am not dribbling a basketball chances are I’m studying. I do it because I still love it, and if I didn’t I wouldn’t be playing.”

.....and if you were wondering what Joe’s only B was in

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