**College Athletics: Not All Fun and Games**

Every year approximately 16,000 high school seniors throughout the United States sign a national letter of intent to continue their athletic careers at the college level. For many, this decision is a lifelong dream come true.

Kayton Marshall graduated from Poquoson High School in Virginia Beach, Virginia in 2008 and signed to wrestle at the University of Oklahoma and says it was a big accomplishment for him. “It was like everything I had been working for since I started wrestling when I was six was to be a NCAA champion and it was by far the biggest step towards that goal.”

However, with all the excitement that surrounds a college commitment many high school seniors don’t understand exactly what it takes to be successful at the one of highest level of athletics. Because of this many do not make it through their freshman year of college. For example nearly one-third of athletes from the high school class of 2011 had left their sport by November of their first semester. It is no different at the Junior College level than it is at the NCAA Division I level. For example, of the just over 1,000 men’s basketball players at Division I schools throughout the country, only 60 percent of them returned for their sophomore campaigns at the same school they played for the previous season, if they return to the sport at all.

**Why Does This Happen?**

The reasons for an athlete leaving their teams tend to vary. For some, it is a career-ending injury, but for many like Kelsey Kapella, it was a choice made to focus on their academics, which is why they are in college to begin with. Kapella is a sophomore studying athletic training at Evangel University in Springfield, MO. “For me, the decision to play or not to play softball anymore came down to whether or not I wanted to concentrate on my academics and pursue the career that I wanted after graduation or to get a few more years with the sport I enjoyed playing.” Many times even though they make the decision knowingly, it is still a tough one. “Looking back at my decision, I am still glad I did what I did, I don't regret it. Sometimes I wish I would have been able to manage playing sports with my academics, because it had been a dream of mine ever since I was little. But, as a life decision it was a good one” said Kapella.

Leon Cherry played two years of baseball for North Arkansas Community College (Harrison, ARK) and is now attending Missouri State University, but opted to not play at his new school. A broadcasting major, Cherry enjoyed his time as a student-athlete but preferred to spend his final college years as just a student. “I just wanted to focus on school more and not try to get tied down. Just being a college athlete is so much more stressful because you have to keep up with homework, practice, games and weights and all that stuff.” Most former athletes who leave their sport for academic reasons do not regret the decision. For Kapella and Cherry they have enjoyed the time to get ahead in their classes and the opportunity to live a life outside of sports.

**College Athletics Are Stressful**

A student-athlete’s work is never done. Nearly every waking hour, most are working, either on their schoolwork, or in some regards to their particular sport. Mikiah Moore is currently a freshman softball player at Labette Community College (Parsons, KS) and describes her schedule as a very hectic one. From seven o’clock a.m. to 1 p.m. she attends her classes. Immediately following school she heads to the weight room then on to the softball field where the team practices until after sundown. “After practice we go home, eat, and study. Then we do it all again the next day” she said.

Most athletes at other institutions can relate to such a schedule. Mallory Davis is a sophomore pitcher for the same team as Moore, and says that although the stress is pretty extreme, if you can make it through the first year it does get better. “Freshman year was very stressful while trying to figure out how my schedule worked and making sure I would be everywhere I was supposed to be. My stress now is from just not knowing if I will get all my hours in time to graduate.”

Many of the best programs in the country like the women’s basketball team at College of the Ozarks (Point Lookout, MO) are the ones who decided to make the commitment every day to continue that tradition, both coaches and players alike. The Lady Bobcats have finished as the NAIA Division II national runner up four of the last eight seasons but they are also recipients of the Character Award three of the past four years. Hannah Harman is a sophomore post for the Lady Cats and NAIA Hall of Fame coach George Wilson, and says that her coaches make sure their players are doing well not just on the court but academically and as people as well. “He checks our grades weekly, asks about them, and even helps us study for tests if we are struggling.”

**Junior College Becoming a Top Option for Many Athletes**

Many little kids dream of someday playing their sport for a major university in a large city somewhere. However, more times than not that dream doesn’t become a reality and kids are left with a choice. They must choose whether to give up on their dream of college athletics or pursue it at a smaller school. In recent years, more athletes are choosing to go the junior college route because of the opportunities for immediate playing time, moving on to a higher level, or of a short commitment. For people such as Stormi Bond, it was the two-year commitment that attracted her. Bond played two seasons of softball at Labette Community College and now attends Pittsburg State University (Kansas) pursuing a degree in athletic training. Bond knew all through high school she wanted to play college softball, however she also realized the reality of the “real world” ahead and wanted to get her degree as quickly as possible.

Moore, who is currently playing for the same program as Bond, said that that particular program is a very high maintenance one. “We go hard every day even on days off we still condition. The first week was awful. I was constantly confused and in trouble.” she said.

Davis and Moore agree that their coach, Ryan Phillips, plays an important role in making sure their academic work is a high priority. Davis says “While he gives you your recruiting speech, he stresses the importance of our grades to our parents. He strives for us all to make good grades, and we are disciplined if we do not but we can also get rewarded if we do. We come to college to get an education and playing ball is just an extra.” Many junior college sophomores like Davis relish in the opportunity to choose their futures. While athletes that attend four year universities are often times considered to be ‘quitters’ when leaving a program, a junior college sophomore that opts to not continue their careers can take pride in the fact that they have completed their commitments. “I don’t know what my plans are after this year at Labette (Community College). I have not yet decided. It depends on where my offers are, and if I want to go away from home again.”

According to recent studies, female athletes are more likely to leave their sports than males. For men, sports have been their lives for as long as they can remember. It is their connection to the world and they aren’t sure what they would do without it. They tend to remain on college athletic teams even without much playing time, simply because it’s what they know. For women, they usually have been involved in sports for a lesser time than most men and therefore the separation from the sport isn’t as drastic a change. Many times, they find many other things to do and are able to adjust to life as a non-athlete. Also, the opportunity for a possible professional athletic career is much slimmer for females as it is for their male counterparts.

Because of the difficulty that faces college student-athletes during a year, and the stress that comes with it, high school seniors are advised by collegiate coaches to consult someone who has gone through it. When asked what advice they would give to athletes considering playing at the college level Harman says “I would tell them it is a big step up from high school and you have to be willing to give yourself up to whatever sport it is they are wanting to play. I would also say they are going to work harder than they ever thought they could but I would make sure to tell them that if they can push through it all it is worth it.” Davis says that it is something they must be passionate about. “Make sure it is something you want to do. If you are not going to be fully committed then it isn’t the thing for you. Don’t think you will have a normal college life. It takes most of your life while you are there.”