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Team Culture is Key to Success: Learning from Student-Athletes

“Everybody takes an interest in students here—whatever that student does.” With this one statement, Athletic Director Curtis Campbell (Roanoke College) has captured one of the values that makes liberal arts education work: staff, faculty, and administrators see students and support what they do. The tradition of Lutheran higher education develops students as whole persons, supporting their exploration of vocation or callings in many aspects of their lives and undergraduate careers.

During one spectacular December weekend, the successes of student-athletes at Lutheran colleges were plain for all to see. In consecutive days California Lutheran University’s Women’s Soccer Team won the national championship and St. Olaf College’s Men’s Soccer Team won the national championship. One particularly spectacular weekend featured the success of three campuses in our Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities. Both of these historic wins took place at Kerr Field, on the campus of Roanoke College. The athletic accomplishments of three schools in the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) were in the spotlight simultaneously, thanks to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III championship games.

Salem, VA, home of Roanoke College, is commonly called “Championship City” by those involved in NCAA Division III (D3) sports. It is, by all reports, a beautiful place to be. Conference planners must think so, too, given that the Championship games held in December 2023 raised the number of championship games played there to 100 over the last thirty years.



Curtis Campbell says D3 sports exemplify the love of the game, the true amateur version of sports. Even as laws evolve to protect and compensate players—especially those competing at quasi-professional levels—in D3 players compete out of love for the game. D3 supporters cheer on their teams in true community spirit. At this level (the level of most athletic teams at NECU schools), players do not

receive scholarships for athletics. Players are recruited as “student-athletes,” with much to gain as well as contribute to wider campus life. Coaches at D3 schools recruit for love of the game and community spirit as much as for competence in any given position. Coaches always want students who are excited about learning and thrive in the classroom as much as they thrive in competitive sports. This combination of academics and sports makes great scholar-athletes.

Excellence On and Off the Field

Frank Marino and Justin Oliver, the coaches of Cal Lutheran’s Women’s Soccer Team and St. Olaf College’s Men’s Soccer Team, respectively, both spoke with pride about the successes of their players in academics as well as sports. Asked about what characterizes his players, Coach Oliver responded, “we have high achievers on and off the field. We only recruit people that can succeed academically, athletically and socially. We had a 3.52 GPA; 27/31 students had above a 3.0.” Cal Lutheran’s Women’s Soccer Team has a cumulative 3.6 GPA and a 90% persistence rate to 4-year graduation. This kind of success takes a village, which is why many teams have a faculty or staff advocate. Dr. Molly George serves in that capacity for the women’s team at Cal Lutheran. During the long weekends of championship play out of state (where several players saw snow for the first time!), players had to negotiate due dates and exam conditions with professors. Dr. George enjoyed her role in facilitating alternative arrangements for players during their stay in Salem, VA. “As a faculty mentor, I found great satisfaction in developing and facilitating strategies to enable our students to thrive academically while excelling at the highest level in Division III sports. The impressive GPA of the women’s soccer team and their historic National Championship victory underscore Coach Marino and the coaching staff’s emphasis on academics. Additionally, our faculty’s commitment to supporting students both on and off the field is evident once they are educated about how to best support these incredible student athletes’ ability to multitask.”

Student-athletes have to learn effective time management, and it differs in peak season and off-season. Perhaps counter-intuitively, their time management is most effective

“The road to success is never an easy path. Winning this championship took work, talent, some luck, but most importantly, a team of girls that became a family. Our small D3 team went from unranked to #1 in the Nation by taking the tournament game by game and being grateful for everything we earned. Our humility and determination allowed us to achieve so many goals we never could have imagined. However, the biggest asset to our team was believing in each other and translating off the field relationships onto the pitch. I have never been a part of a group so special and filled with love in all of my years playing soccer. Our love within our team also spread to our community at Cal Lu. The amount of support we received from other Cal Lu teams, faculty, and most importantly our parents gave us the strength to continuously push through this tournament. When I joined the Cal Lu Women’s soccer team I wasn’t joining just a winning program, but a team with an incredible sense of culture. This culture is what allowed us to become a Championship team. I will always dedicate our journey to the unbreakable bonds we created, and I will be eternally grateful to not only have a trophy but sisters for life.”

Adri

during peak season, when they need to be mentally sharp in all situations and play time is contingent on satisfactory progress. Time management can be more challenging in the off season, when they have more time available. Without the press of daily practices and competitive play, it can be hard to prioritize tasks. Encouraging teammates to keep succeeding after winning a title is part of the team culture that has been built by Oles and Regals alike. According to Coach Oliver, “Winning is contagious and

winning in the classroom translates to winning on the field and to winning in your relationships along the way.”

Building Team Culture

Coach Marino studied the connection between community and teamwork for his Master’s thesis. Marino says that relationships and team culture are key to success. “Everything builds on previous years. Getting off-the-field community right—serving others, building authentic relationships, leading by example—all of that translates onto the field.” At Cal

Lutheran, Coach Marino has led book groups for each year related to team culture and building relationships since 2017. Shawn Howie '78 has led a few of the community-building activities for Regals Soccer. From “speed-dating” to small group conversation, Howie created opportunities for the players to know each other as people, to learn about each other’s dreams and goals, and to develop respect for one another as a baseline for team culture. Through both carefully constructed practices on the field and team-building activities off the field, players learn to prioritize collective success over individual achievement. This approach is true for all



players, regardless of ability or play-time. Marino explains, "They do what's best for the team, whether or not they're contributing the way they want to be; they want what's best for the team, not necessarily themselves."

Healthy team relationships make room for difficult conversations. The team-building process, which is extended, developed, and personalized through team captains, creates an environment where players can speak their mind and work together to solve problems, whether relational or individual. Howie explains, "There are mistakes in soccer all the time. And they can get in your mind." Team culture can support players through physical injuries and mental distress. The Regals' culture played a big role

"**W**inning the NCAA Division III National Championship wasn't even a consideration last year when our season came to an abrupt end after a loss in our conference tournament. Yet, we went on to play a record-breaking season this year and end as #1 in the nation for Division III women's soccer. When people ask me how we did it I always describe our team culture. We're more than a team and I fully believe that it's what made us champions. Our team was built on a foundation of trust, understanding, and friendship, which wasn't developed overnight. Many hours were poured into team bonding in hopes of building authentic relationships amongst each other. Understanding and empathizing with each other's diverse stories is what got us through the struggles of a long and overwhelming journey to success. Our appreciation and respect for one another is what got us through score deficits and feelings of lost hope. In the end, making a family out of a team is what allowed us to celebrate each tiny victory until we got to our final destination.

Vale

"**L**ast soccer season was a dream come true. Transferring from the University of San Diego to Cal Lutheran for my final year, I anticipated a fun season to cap off my soccer career. However, it became much more. Pre-season involved setting standards, sharing goals, and bonding as a team. A casual mention of winning a National Championship sparked a shift in our mindset. Each practice and game became about striving for a collective goal. Early morning workouts and late practices tested our limits and prepared us for challenges. Our resilience defined us; even when trailing, we rallied to tie or win games. Our success stemmed from our unity and belief in each other. Despite a setback in the SCIAC tournament, we remained steadfast, guided by faith. And it paid off. We shattered records and clinched the national title, a testament to our coaches, teammates, supporters, and faith in God's plan.

Eden

in helping the players persist through injuries and challenging games when they came from behind to tie or win in dramatic circumstances, such as overtime play and penalty kicks. Howard Davis, Athletic Director at Cal Lutheran says, "This group of amazing women are so connected and committed to one another. They were a joy to watch all season. So many times, throughout their playoff run this team's connection and grit stood out and were what made them successful."

Team culture is a big part of the Oles' success as well. Coach Oliver says, "Our success this year I think is the culmination of a lot of things. We had twelve seniors that had given everything to this program and are a huge reason we won. They are amazing soccer players and even better people. We had a team that had been through a lot of highs and lows together and that helped us this season especially.

We also had a fantastic process that allowed us to go day by day and focus on being present together while working towards a national championship.” And every step of the way they shared their successes with their campus, and their campus community was there to support them.

Student-Athletes in Liberal Arts and Sciences

Lutheran Higher Education centers the dignity of all persons and seeks to develop students as whole human beings. That said, the time demands of sports are sometimes seen to compete with studies and the financial expenses are sometimes called into question during difficult budget years. Asked about the connections between athletics and liberal arts and sciences education, Coach Marino and Coach Oliver had this to say. “So much of what they learn is relatable to life. Working together as a team gets them ready to work with others in the world. They have to manage time

to be successful in sport and class. And there are life lessons of leadership, relationships, and working really hard for success.” Coach Marino went on to say that, “Enterprise and other companies hire student-athletes because they know those employees arrive with a team mindset.” Coach Oliver agrees: “Our culture is why we had the success we did, we are a product of our culture. We have a team of genuinely good guys, that are high achievers on and off the field that love to be held to and hold others to very high standards. When things get difficult instead of getting more individualistic they lean on each other for help and support. They are great at picking each other up when they see someone is down, if someone is injured the next person steps up.”

Both St. Olaf and Cal Lutheran were awarded National Coaching Staff of the Year by the United Soccer Coaches.

Tired and burned out from a tough season, the Regals gathered around a white board to reconnect with their WHY—to align their motivations and goals together. They have generously agreed to share their list with *Intersections*. We think it may help you and your team, too.

Relationships are key to success Positive self talk and group conversation Have fun—enjoy each moment Appreciate sunsets Love each other, love the game, be truly grateful to God Remember our why Take care of your body Protect your peace Protect your mentality Love, respect and care for each other Love our seniors Focus on the controllables—energy, effort	Appreciate the little things Focus on one good thing Treat each practice like you are warming up for a game Watch films and prepare well Take action—not just words Be united Team needs vs individual needs Appreciate our tiny victories Be a coach and be coachable Let the negative go Not complaining and not making excuses High level of communications Listen and be open minded	Structured game plan Collectivity Consistency within games Full 90 minutes Creativity Be relentless Focus together Keep the passion—enjoy every moment Be positive Be close knit family Listen and be open minded Be creative Be relentless No energy vampires
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