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Sports For All The Right Reasons

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S P O R T S F O R

I was an elite athlete. I participated in a variety of sports in my life but reached the pinnacle as a lacrosse player. As a member of various lacrosse teams, I was a high school state champion, a collegiate national champion, and a world champion. I don't usually like to talk about my accomplishments, but I need to make a very important point: Reaching the highest level in my field has little to do with why I want to coach women's sports at Swarthmore College.

If the level of an athlete's achievement is predictive of a person's future career, like many of my former teammates, I should be coaching at a Division I lacrosse powerhouse. But here I am at a small, elite liberal arts college, and people often ask me why. My answer leads directly to my philosophy of sport, which, in turn, dictates how I coach—and recruit—Swarthmore scholar-athletes. These days, there's a lot of discussion about athletic recruiting at the College. After this explanation, I hope you will gain a better understanding of how I "recruit" the scholar-athlete.

Let's start with a simple but important fact: No athlete likes to lose, whether it's lunchtime tennis, pick-up basketball, recreation softball, intramural soccer, or intercollegiate athletics. It's also a fact, however, that every time there is a contest, there will be a winner and a loser. I've come to the conclusion that because I was on so many successful teams, where winning was often taken for granted, I learned to notice other aspects of sport. Don't get me wrong—winning was fun, and I enjoyed it, but there was a lot more to it. I also started to see that "success," as it is often defined in sport, can have its negative aspects.

As a junior education major at the University of Delaware, I got the opportunity to coach at a local private school and was immediately hooked. I learned then that I wanted to coach, but to be able to coach and make a living, I also needed to teach; I had not yet made the connection that they were one and the same. So I became a high school math teacher, and, for six years, I taught math all day



JIM GRAHAM

KAREN BORBEE, SWARTHMORE'S LACROSSE COACH, TRIES TO BALANCE ACADEMIC AND ATHLETIC TALENTS WHEN RECRUITING FOR THE COLLEGE. SHE SAYS THAT "SWARTHMORE SELLS ITSELF TO STUDENTS WHO ARE LOOKING FOR THIS KIND OF EXPERIENCE."

and coached sports after school. I enjoyed teaching math, but it was in the coaching that I felt I was truly making a difference. I could see the educational role that sport was playing in these students' lives.

While I was coaching high school field hockey and lacrosse, I was also a member of the U.S. National Team playing world-cup

ALL THE RIGHT REASONS

Play for fun, demand your best, and be satisfied no matter what the outcome.

By Karen Emas Borbee

lacrosse. I realized then that there were many similarities between my experiences at the world-cup level and my student-athletes' experiences in high school. The only difference was our skill. The intangibles, as I call them, were the same. In fact, whatever the skill, the educational value of sport is indisputable—the life lessons that can be learned from team play—and that was what interested me (see box on p. 23).

As my philosophy of sport evolved, I knew that coaching was the type of educating I wanted to pursue. The lessons that could be taught through sport are so powerful, and although sport wasn't the only avenue to teach these intangibles, it was what I knew best.

I was lucky. First at Haverford College and for the past 11 years at Swarthmore, I found a quality academic, liberal arts, Division III experience. Once again, I was hooked.

When I first came to Swarthmore, I was hired as the head women's basketball and soccer coach. With little experience coaching either sport, I had to put my basic philosophy to an immediate test. I thought that no matter what sport I coached, I could still educate. This was never so clear as during that first basketball season, when my team lost 24 straight games—more than half of them by more than 40 points, and a handful by 60 to 70 points. Not one player or coach quit that season. As I watched the amazing growth of those students, I grew too. Everyone kept working, and we were able to win the final game of the season, against a team that had beaten us by 30 points earlier that same year. You might have thought we had won the national championship that night.

My job that season was to teach those students how to have fun; how to deal with their limitations yet still reach their potential; how to lean on each other yet support each other; and how to

appreciate their diversity and what makes them special, even though it meant they might not be the better basketball team. I know that when those women—now grown, 10 years later—have tough times, they look back and use what they learned that season to find the positive aspects of any challenging situation.

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My ever-evolving philosophy was further put to the test during my first field hockey season six years later. This time, it wasn't losing that was the issue but winning. When I became the head field-hockey coach, I inherited a very successful team. But for many players, winning was the only reason for playing. One woman said to me during a one-on-one meeting, “If we don't win, then it's not fun, and there's no reason to play.” My challenge that season was to teach the group that numbers of wins are not the measuring stick—that they could have fun, reap all the benefits from participation in sports, and still be successful. We struggled at times, both on and off the field, but, in the end, although our winning percentage was lower, our accomplishments as a group were greater.

My philosophy of sport is very simple: Play to have fun, demand your best, but be satisfied with your best no matter what the out-

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come. Sport is a minimodel of life: What you learn on the field, you take with you as you live your life.

Swarthmore students amaze me. They play the game for the right reasons, they have their priorities straight, and they study hard and play hard. It is my job to help them understand that, unlike in the classroom, they may not always be the best athletes, but they can still always give their best.

So I knew why I wanted to be here. I wanted to propagate the benefits of participation in sport, and I knew there were young women out there who would want to reap those benefits without losing their focus on academics. I knew I could help these students to learn all the intangibles and help foster their multiple talents, both athletic and intellectual.

All this leads me to the question of how I recruit scholar-athletes to study and play at Swarthmore College. I look for the special young woman who seeks—in addition to the best education in the world—the benefits of participation in sport. I don’t look for the athlete who is really smart; instead, I look for the scholar who wants to play sports. This young woman is not simply a scholar or an athlete—she can be both and, at Swarthmore, still more than that.

When I can find a young woman who is a scholar, who wants a Swarthmore academic experience and is a strong lacrosse player, it’s a good day. If I can’t, then I look for a young woman who is first a scholar, wants a Swarthmore experience, and loves to play lacrosse. Then it’s up to me to teach her the game as well as I can and as well as she is able to learn it. But most important, it’s up to me to help her reap all the benefits that she can receive through participation in sport.

Each year, I start with 150 to 200 interested candidates. After I do research, make phone calls, write letters, attend tournaments, and review videotapes, that number is quickly reduced to about 50.



UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

BORBEE, A LACROSSE STANDOUT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE, WAS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP U.S. NATIONAL TEAM. “SWARTHMORE STUDENTS AMAZE ME,” SHE SAYS. “THEY HAVE THEIR PRIORITIES STRAIGHT, AND THEY STUDY HARD AND PLAY HARD.”

More research is done on those 50; there are more phone calls, letters, visits, videos, and feedback on them—and maybe 25 to 30 actually apply. The Admissions Office accepts approximately 6 to 8, and I hope (with every one of my appendages crossed) that 4 or 5 enroll. Women’s lacrosse is played with 12 players on the field at one time, and 24 are needed to scrimmage in practice. So if we have a couple of bad recruiting years, we are in trouble.

How do I find these young women? In fact, a good portion find me first. Others are recommended by high school coaches or contacts. They know the student and recommend that she explore Swarthmore. Rarely is a student recommended to the College because she is a top athlete but rather because she is a top student, a scholar who loves to play a sport and doesn’t want to give up participating.

I believe that every student-athlete who is interested in coming

LIFE LESSONS FROM SPORT

DEVELOPING FITNESS AND WELLNESS

MANAGING TIME

PRIORITIZING

SETTING GOALS

WORKING TO ACHIEVE THOSE GOALS

STRENGTHENING SELF-CONFIDENCE

WORKING WITH PEOPLE YOU MAY OR MAY NOT LIKE

LEARNING INCLUSION AND ACCEPTANCE

PUTTING PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS ASIDE FOR TEAM ACHIEVEMENTS

DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENT OR LOSING

DEALING WITH SUCCESS OR WINNING

ENCOURAGING SPORTSMANSHIP

DEALING WITH FEAR OR ADVERSITY

EMPHASIZING PERSONAL AND TEAM ACCOUNTABILITY

to Swarthmore College is academically engaged. Why else would anyone want to come? It certainly wouldn't be for athletics alone. There are many top-quality academic institutions that put far more emphasis on sports and others that are less academically challenging but still offer a great education and participation in sports.

My greatest recruiting challenge lies in the competition—Amherst, Williams, Yale, Princeton, and Harvard. Not bad choices. So why Swarthmore? That's my challenge. When a recruit tells me that Swarthmore is one of five or six schools she is interested in, I invite her to visit. I introduce her to the other students on the team and to their roommates and hall mates. I have her attend some classes and meet some faculty members. Swarthmore sells itself to students who are looking for this kind of experience. Almost always, she leaves with Swarthmore either as one of her top choices, or the College is off her list completely. And that's how I like it: Recruits arrive gray and leave black or white.

I'm here because I believe my philosophy of sport and Swarthmore College are a good fit. I spend so much time recruiting in order to ensure the future of my program. If I don't bring in enough recruits for a few years, I will have done a disservice to the students who are already in my program. Still, I walk a fine line. I don't look for the really smart athlete who may be looking for something other than what we offer. I tell them what we've got and hope it's what they want. If I look for talent, and yet it's not the right fit, I have done a disservice to the recruit and to the students in my program. The challenge is in establishing a balance between athletic talent and academic pursuits to make the right fit—both for the young woman and for the College. ❧

Associate Professor of Physical Education Karen Borbee played college lacrosse at the University of Delaware. This essay is adapted from a talk she gave to her fellow members of the faculty in February.