

Cross Training



Student-Athletes balance hectic schedules



Courtesy of SU Athletics

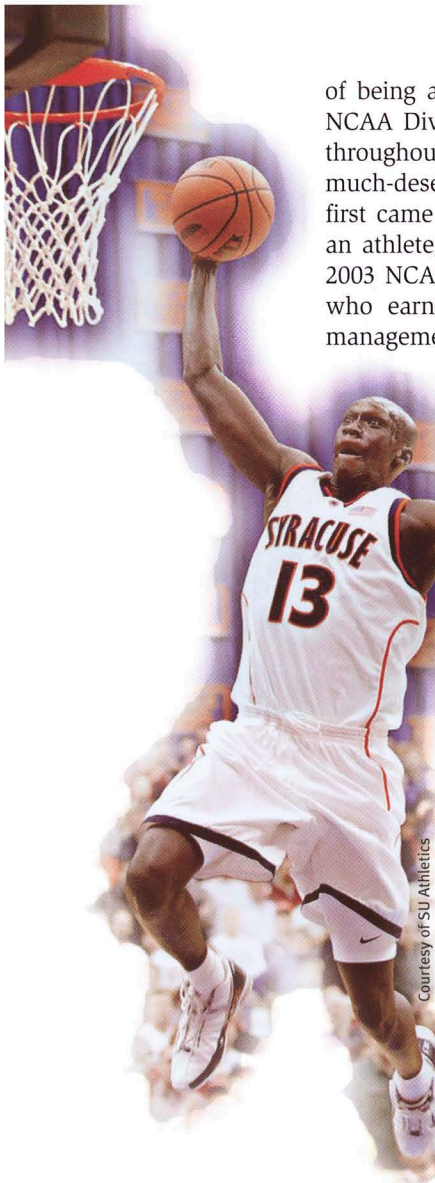
Kalei Mahi '04

to succeed in the classroom and in their sports

BY MARGARET COSTELLO

Nothing wakes you up like plunging into cold water at 6 a.m., especially after a late night of studying. "Finals week is always the hardest," says Kalei Mahi '04, a member of the Syracuse University women's swimming and diving team. "You keep the coffee pot on all night and end up reading the same line in your book over and over. And you debate with yourself, 'My alarm's going off right now, do I get in the car and go, or do I sleep in for an hour and then look over my books before the exam?'" But without fail, Mahi, SU's record-holder in the 100-yard breaststroke, rolls out of bed and dives into her 2-hour, 13,000-yard morning practice in Webster Pool. Her college career depends on that commitment. "I consider swimming my full-time job because my athletic scholarship pays my tuition," says Mahi, a speech communication major in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. "I work hard at my job, but I'm also a student. Sometimes I joke that I'm a swimming major and a student minor, but really it's about finding a balance between the two."

Mahi is not alone in her quest for success in athletic competition and the classroom. Roughly 500 students at SU struggle to balance the course load and social pressures of being a college student with the responsibilities and time commitment



of being an athlete on one of the University's 21 NCAA Division I sports teams. This dual mission throughout their college careers earns them the much-deserved title of student-athlete. "When I first came to college, I considered myself more of an athlete," says Kueth Duany '02, captain of the 2003 NCAA men's basketball championship team, who earned a bachelor's degree in information management and technology. "Now I'm proud to say I was a student-athlete. There's no feeling like having that degree with your name and what you accomplished on it. I don't think any basketball game you could win could bring your parents as much joy and pride."

SU athletic director Jake Crouthamel says Duany, who received the Big East men's basketball conference's 2002-03 Sportsmanship Award, is a classic example of a student-athlete—a standout on the court and in the classroom. "Kueth came to us with a lot of intelligence and has a family that motivated him to be academically successful," he says.

"That encouraging environment differs, in some cases dramatically, from the situation of some of our players." Crouthamel says a few student-athletes, especially in the high-profile sports of men's basketball and football, are accepted by the University at a higher risk and require more academic support and time management training. "These student-athletes need more patience and support because of their prior academic environment and may be more like HEOP [Higher Education Opportunity Program] students who receive the time, understanding, and sensitivity," he says, referring to the state-funded initiative. "In addition to facing the same challenges as HEOP students, these student-athletes are also traveling, practicing, and playing nationally televised games. We have to recognize this uniqueness, and our department literally helps them get by day to day."

But even for those athletes like Duany with strong academic preparation, playing college sports and maintaining good grades can be a Herculean task. "Lots of students could not do what we do," Duany says. "This is physically draining. I think if most students felt as tired as I did, they probably wouldn't go to class." During basketball season, for example, Duany got up early to weight train and do conditioning exercises, attended a full load of classes, and then returned to the gym for individual warm-ups and practice, which usually lasted until 7 p.m. After dinner, he did his homework, col-

lapsed into bed, and started all over again the next morning. When the team traveled, his schedule became even more hectic. "It's the hardest job I've ever had," he says.

THE CLASSROOM ASSIST

To help student-athletes succeed academically, the Department of Athletics operates the Ann and Milton Stevenson Educational Center, which occupies a wing of Manley Field House. The center provides workspace for 80 student-athletes and features two computer clusters, a library, a student lounge, study and conference rooms, and a career development suite. The football program has its own facilities in Manley's Iocolano-Petty Complex, including a computer cluster, cafeteria, auditorium, and meeting rooms for students. The athletics department employs six full-time academic support members, seven graduate assistants, and several work-study students and tutors, who provide academic assistance, counseling, and life skills instruction to student-athletes. "We place a great deal of emphasis on the 'student' part of student-athlete," Crouthamel says. "We invest a significant amount of time, effort, and resources in this support system."

The academic support system for student-athletes has grown dramatically since Crouthamel became athletic director in 1978. Back then, just one graduate assistant, working out of a Steele Hall office, provided all support services. The investment is paying off, as the graduation rate of student-athletes now exceeds the University's overall rate and has earned some teams and the department national accolades. For example, in 1999, the Department of Athletics received the Division I-A Athletic Directors' Association CHAMPS/Life Skills Program of Excellence Award, which recognized SU's commitment to teaching student-athletes the importance of academic success, personal growth, community service, and career development. During the past 10 years, the school has graduated 92 percent of the student-athletes who've completed their playing eligibility at SU, says Todd Wyant, associate athletic director. The football program has consistently graduated more than 70 percent of its members during 10 of the past 12 years, and in 2000 achieved a 100 percent graduation rate, winning the American Football Coaches Association's Academic Achievement Award for that year.

The NCAA and society at large also see the value of college athletes obtaining an education, and recognition programs like the Verizon Academic All-America Teams and the Big East Academic All-Star Teams, which spotlight both academic and athletic accomplishment, are gaining in popularity. "These academic teams tell more of the whole story—that these are students and athletes, not just athletes," Crouthamel says. In 1995, Crouthamel instituted the Athletic Director's Honor Roll to recognize SU student-athletes who perform well in both areas, and to share that message with the

Kueth Duany '02

campus community and the public. "Right now, I don't think most of the community thinks of them as both students and athletes," he says. "There are only a handful of students who are considering a career in professional sports, so most see their sport as a means to an end, not the end itself."

Although many of SU's football and men's basketball players dream of being drafted by professional leagues, they also recognize the importance of having a degree. Nationally, only 3 percent of college football players and 2 percent of men's basketball players make it to the NFL or NBA, Wyant says. "Sports don't last forever," says Rich Scanlon '04, a linebacker and pre-med student who has maintained a 3.76 grade point average (GPA) in the School of Education's exercise science program. "You have to have an education and a degree to fall back on when your football career ends. I don't lose sight of my dual goal: to play in the NFL and to become an orthopedic surgeon."

FULL-CAMPUS PRESSURE

The constant intensity and pressure of their academic and athletic work occasionally carries over into student-athletes' social lives. "You're automatically a role model, even though some guys might not be ready for that role," Duany says. "We're easy to pick out because we're probably the tallest guys on campus and they recognize us." Even in lower profile sports, student-athletes are conscious of their responsibilities as representatives of the University and are discouraged from wearing any team attire when they go out to clubs or other social spaces. The work-hard, play-hard philosophy mixed with their competitive nature can be dangerous for student-athletes who need their bodies and minds to be in top-notch form. "We give so much mentally

and physically that when it comes time to relax, some guys attack partying with the same intensity," Duany says. "You try to give them advice, but sometimes they've got to learn on their own."

Most student-athletes, however, have no problem forgoing a night out in Armory Square for a good night's rest. In fact, during 2001-02, only 2 percent of all disciplinary cases handled by the Office of Judicial Affairs involved student-athletes, who make up 6 percent of the total student population, says Associate Dean of Students Dessa Bergen-Cico '86, G'88, G'92. Bergen-Cico, who was a member of SU's cross country and indoor and outdoor track teams, now oversees the University's Substance Abuse Prevention and Health Enhancement Office, which runs Options, an alcohol and other drug counseling program. "There's an incredible amount of pressure on student-athletes, especially those in high-profile sports, who get offered sex, alcohol, drugs, and other things by people who want to share in the athletes' celebrity status," Bergen-Cico says. "It takes a mature, strong person to resist that."

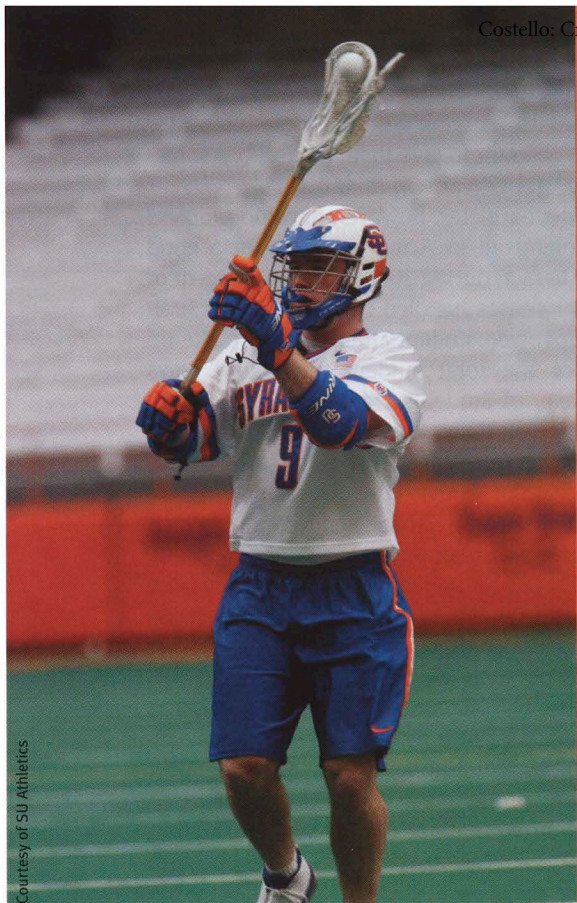
However, student-athletes have great support networks and protective tools to assist them in avoiding those temptations. For example, coaches, trainers, and academic advisors interact with them on an almost daily basis and serve as parental figures who check up on them regularly. Additionally, student-athletes must submit to NCAA-mandated random drug testing and risk suspension from their sport (and possible loss of scholarship) for alcohol or other drug use. "That can be a great tool for student-athletes who are looking for an excuse to turn down a joint or leave a party," Bergen-Cico says.



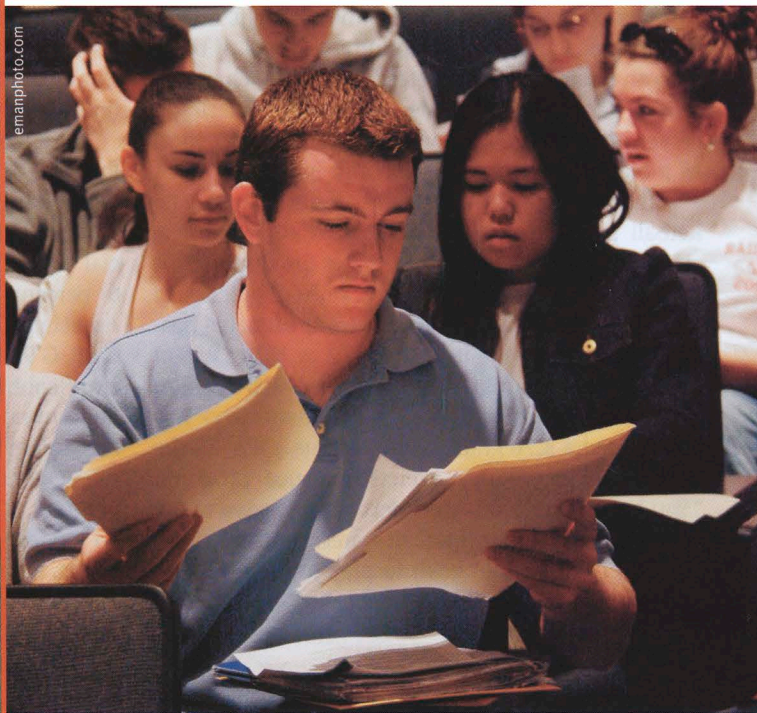
Courtesy of SU Athletics



Anne-Marie Lapalme '04



Courtesy of SU Athletics



Greg Rommel '06

Teammates can also provide positive reinforcement at those awkward moments with peers. "I've had fun at parties without having a drink in my hand, and I don't think I'm missing too much," Mahi says. "Because of athletes' camaraderie, no one looks down on you if you're not partying it up."

What's harder to pass up are the opportunities other students have to study abroad for a semester, take a summer internship, or get involved in Greek life or other campus activities. "I dreamed of spending a semester or a year in Italy because some of my family is from there," Mahi says. "I wanted to experience the culture, but swimming keeps me from doing that. That's the price I have to pay to swim for such a great school." SU women's soccer player Anne-Marie Lapalme '04, an All-Big East Second Team midfielder and a former member of Canada's national team, worries about spending her summers training and playing soccer instead of getting practical job experience. "I'm scared what employers will think because I've never had a real job, but I think it's worth it," says the Granby, Quebec, native. "Playing a sport helped me academically, and it's made me more mature and responsible than many people my age."

Lapalme, a nutrition major in the College of Human Services and Health Professions, takes advantage of the Stevenson Educational Center and its services. Last year, for instance, she requested a chemistry tutor to help her through a difficult course. "If I need to read or study, I go to Stevenson Educational Center," she says. "If I need anything, there are people here for me." The center hires

tutors on an hourly basis to assist student-athletes in a variety of subjects individually or in larger group sessions for math, biology, and writing. Student-athletes are also responsible for contacting faculty and making up assignments they miss when they are traveling with their teams. "We really want the students to articulate what they need and be able to talk and make arrangements with faculty about missed work," says Terry MacDonald, a learning specialist and advisor with the athletics department for 17 years.

If academic conflicts arise, the student-athletes depend on support from one of six advisors like MacDonald, who are assigned to each of the teams. These advisors receive copies of student-athletes' course schedules, syllabi, and mid-semester grade reports. At the beginning of the semester, they provide their students' professors with a letter outlining the dates on which students will miss class for competitions. MacDonald works with members of the men's lacrosse and men's basketball teams and keeps a notebook with a list of her athletes' weekly assignments. "It's difficult for students to manage their personal schedules because they're at the mercy of their game schedules," she says. "Sometimes it puts students in a position where it's really hard to negotiate, and, at that point, we will intervene on the student's behalf, explain the situation to the faculty member, and see if we can make alternative arrangements." The advisors have been known to proctor exams in hotels; arrange for classes to be videotaped and tests or papers to be faxed from the road; and make separate travel plans for a team member to attend class. On rare occasions, a student-athlete may have to miss a competition because of an academic obligation.

Mediation and facilitation are greatly appreciated by the student-athletes, who have a vested interest in pleasing both their professors and coaches. "Mrs. MacDonald does so much for us," says lacrosse player Greg Rommel '06, a biochemistry major in the College of Arts and Sciences. "We wouldn't have much of a team without her. She keeps us all in line." MacDonald says if one of her students skips classes or neglects to turn in assignments, she'll interrupt practice or a weight-room workout to speak with him. "That way the student and coach are there together," she says. "I have a captive audience, so to speak."

THE BREAKAWAY

Many coaches, like softball head coach Mary Jo Firnbach, set GPA requirements for team members, who must attend study-table sessions at Stevenson Educational Center if their averages drop below the team standard. "I expect my team members to be students first and athletes second," Firnbach says. "I do require specific study-table hours, which is not meant to be a punishment. It's an avenue to help them succeed." For example, if a team member's GPA dips below 3.0, she requires the player to meet with her academic advisor and attend study table as much as 10 hours a week. "I expect my student-athletes to work hard and take responsibility for their grades just as I expect them to work hard on the field," she says. "I tell them regularly that they will not make a living by playing softball, but it's a wonderful avenue to help them get a degree and, most importantly, to learn about life."

Softball utility player Julie Dunn '03, who received a bachelor's degree in magazine journalism from the Newhouse School, is among the vast majority of SU student-athletes who aren't participating in their sport professionally after graduation, but hope they left

their mark on campus. Dunn graduated knowing she helped begin a Big East softball program at Syracuse, scored the team's first run, and hit the first grand slam. She also earned academic accolades along the way, maintaining a 3.5 GPA and being named to the 2002 Verizon Academic All-America Third Team. "Playing softball in college made me a better student because it forced me to have more discipline, which I hope will seep into my work habits as I start my career in media relations," Dunn says. "Playing a team sport is like being in a workplace because you have to work with others to accomplish your goal."

Many employers have reported that student-athletes make excellent staff members

Rich Scanlon '04

because they have developed such characteristics as teamwork, dedication, and work ethic. "Athletics on a resume can be the one thing that differentiates candidates, and based on our experience, employers consider athletic participation a definite plus," Crouthamel says.

In addition to helping them land a job, many student-athletes hope their habit of daily workouts and healthy living remains with them for life. "I plan on being active until the day I die," Scanlon says. "It's part of who I am." For Mahi, swimming has provided the structure to keep her grounded as a person. "When I leave here, I want to say, 'I swam all four years and did well,' and I want to have a record under my belt and a bachelor's degree in my hand," she says. "Although I don't think I'll swim competitively after graduation, it will be nice to work all day and jump in the pool and swim the stress of the day off. Swimming has helped me maintain balance in my life, and I hope it always will."



Julie Dunn '03

Courtesy of SU Athletics

John Dowling