

Chapter 8. Balancing Athletic and Academic Responsibilities

Joel Southern is a former college coach and athletics administrator. In this interview, he shares his thoughts on how athletes can balance athletics and academics.

Let's say you have an athlete who is extremely self-motivated concerning athletics, but doesn't have that same passion for schoolwork. Are there any ways to get him to transfer that same drive into academic pursuits?

“I don't believe you can be committed to excellence in one area and not committed to excellence in another. That is going to show up somewhere. If you are willing to cut corners or not finish the job when it comes to schoolwork, it will eventually manifest itself in other areas as well. The athlete may think they are completely committed to what they are doing from an athletic standpoint, but eventually it will catch up to them.

I'm a faculty member in the chemistry department. Our other coaches have advanced degrees, so we can serve as a model to the student-athletes. The 'too cool for school' mentality that says you are a nerd if you do well in class can run rampant among athletes. We have to fight against that. I reject the idea that you can't be excellent in more than one thing.”

What do you say when you can sense that a player isn't really pushing themselves academically?

“The main overarching thing is to emphasize the importance of academics on a daily basis. Two of the big buzz phrases in baseball these days are 'play disciplined' and 'on-base percentage'. So if you want those things to happen, you have to emphasize how important they are. You talk about it every day. Then it becomes part of how they go about their business.

We don't just talk about their academic performance - we monitor it as well. We have study halls. Since our coaching staff are faculty members, we can step in and say to their teachers, 'hey, we are really serious about these guys going to class. We need to know if a kid is in trouble or having an issue.'

My off field responsibility is to monitor our guys academic progress. If a kid is doing poorly in one class, we will ask them what they are doing to change the situation. I tell the kids, 'Hey, this is a small school. One of the great things we have here is the ability to meet one to one with your professors. You can find a tutor fairly easily.'

Specifically, we look at grades and we ask them what they are doing to improve.

If they say something vague like, 'I'll do better', I will ask what behaviors are they going to change. They need to answer what they plan to start to do differently to improve. It takes a lot of follow up to see where they are and how things are progressing. You can't just say 'study hard and take care of your academics' and be done with it.

We try to lead the horse to water so to speak. We don't follow them back to their dorm room. There is a fine line with being too invasive and giving them too much freedom. These guys need to learn on their own how to take care of their business.

We as coaches do have the ultimate leverage of playing time. We don't tell them, 'hey, if you don't get a 3.0 you won't play, but if the academics slip and they need a re-fresher for why they are here, we'll sit them down.'

Helping athletes develop more disciplined study habits. What is the coach's role in this regard? How can you help athletes to become better time managers?

"As soon as they get on campus, players are in a structured environment. They have fall workouts and we start our weight-lifting program at that time. We start study halls for the freshman in the second week. Sophomore and juniors whose GPA's may be trending in the wrong direction may be in those study halls as well (they are held twice a week).

Let's say an athlete doesn't have a class until 11 am, it becomes real easy to sleep in. We want them to develop more disciplined study habits, so we may suggest a 9 am study hall. We want them out of bed and letting them know what they should be doing – whether it's at study hall or working from the dorm. They should be looking over notes, working on project assignments, etc. Some guys come out of high school without having to do much homework or without having to manage their time. We are replacing the parents in the sense of monitoring what they are doing in class.

We do 'spot checks' to see if they are attending class. We don't want to mass email professors and ask them who is and who isn't attending, so periodically we check for ourselves. We want our guys to sit in the first 3 rows of class all year. Our reasoning is simple: it's easy to sit in the first 3 rows when they first get here in September, but then the 12th week of the semester rolls around, the kids will have a tendency to zone out. You are more likely to pay better attention in the front of class. It's a pre-emptive strike. This will cause you to have better class habits.

If people aren't making proper use of their study hall, showing up un-prepared, or if they are late to class, I'll have to hammer them on that. The head coach and myself are big believers for team consequences for individual mess-ups. If one kid gets in trouble on campus or continually misses classes, that affects all of us. That's something that especially the freshmen have to understand.

Another thing we do as far as monitoring is give the players calendars. We tell them that they need to write out for the next couple of weeks what projects are due when; the dates of any presentation you have to give; and any upcoming exam dates. At least once a week, I will look at those calendars and say, 'Ok, you have a paper due next Wednesday, is it completed? What have you done for that so far? Where are you in the process?'

Lots of times assignments are given at the start of the semester, but they need a little prompting to get going. Being a good student involves planning your time. Telling them, 'hey, you can start working on that right now so it won't overwhelm you at the last minute' is an important concept to re-inforce.

This comes back to getting them to form good habits. We tell them, 'You can plan ahead. You can use your calendar. When something is done, mark it off.' That way, they can chart their own progress along the way.

It gets very difficult in the spring during baseball season when there are more temptations to blow off academics. Let's say practice is at 2 pm and there is a home game later that night. It's

easy for a student to sleep in until 11, grab lunch and then head over to batting practice. We really have to fight that. I tell the guys, 'Look, were not professionals. We don't have the option of phoning in the rest of our day and just showing up at the ball park.'

On the other hand, we're not running an intramural team here. I like to think winning as many games as we have is a by-product of the way we are going about our business. By focusing more on process than winning, we end up doing very well.

Based on your job as both teacher and coach, what success principles translate best for both academics and athletics?

"As a teacher, I don't have the same leverage I have as a coach writing out a line up card. It's a big motivator in dictating performance – who plays and who doesn't.

At the Division 3 level (non-scholarship), you are more likely to see a more co-curricular emphasis between academics and athletics. We sell that to our prospective student-athletes. You get some players who think they can 'turn it on and turn it off' when it comes to academics. I don't buy that. We talk about commitment to excellence in all areas. That doesn't mean we expect everyone to be a 4.0, but we do expect them to work up to their abilities.

As a coach, you can have so much more of an affect on the students than as a teacher. If non-athlete students don't want to apply themselves, there is not a lot a teacher can do. However, athletics is the ultimate meritocracy. If you can't get the job done, we'll find someone else who will or try a different approach.

My coaching philosophy permeates how I teach. I talk about hard work, discipline, accountability, finishing the job you start, and sacrificing current comfort for future gain. I challenge some of the students to get up to speed. In the classroom, the student will often turn it around and think it is the teacher's fault if they do poorly. So the coaching principles don't always work as well in the classroom.

I think that when a coach emphasizes academics it means so much more to a player than hearing it from a teacher. It's expected from a teacher, but not necessarily from a coach."

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