

# Coach for College

A Global Initiative to Promote Higher Education Through Sports

## The Value of Student-Athletes Off the Field

By Parker Goyer

Since age five, tennis has been a positive force in my life. Working toward becoming a nationally ranked tennis player taught me numerous valuable life lessons and helped me get into a rigorous university - Duke.

But once at college, my commitment to tennis became a liability. When they saw me wearing my tennis clothes to class, some professors immediately assumed I would need extensive remedial help to pass their courses. In the spring of my senior year, I applied to get into one of Duke's most popular classes. Knowing I was an athlete, and afraid I would not be willing to do the work required, the professor did not want to admit me. My sheer persistence, honed through countless failures on the tennis court, wore him down.

His decision to relent changed my life. In that class, I learned about social entrepreneurship, and the professor became a close mentor. When I had an idea to develop a new civic

engagement program in Vietnam, he encouraged me to make a pitch directly to the provost, from whom I would eventually obtain seed funding. The professor also offered me a postgraduate fellowship, giving me the platform to turn my fledgling idea into a legitimate initiative. Long single-mindedly focused on excellence in sports, I began utilizing skills that sports had provided me to acquire a broader range of experiences in academic research, leadership and service that led me to become a Rhodes Scholar.

That initial idea from my senior year turned into Coach for College (CFC), a summer program that uses sports, academics, and life skills classes to increase the academic motivation and educational attainment of low-income Vietnamese adolescents. The program is led by bilingual Vietnamese college students and American student-athletes, who not only give of themselves but also develop key skills needed in today's interconnected world: cultural sensitivity, a global perspective and increased confidence in their ability to make a positive difference through service.

Since 2008, we have raised \$1.8 million and held 30 three-week camps, serving more than 2,200 Vietnamese youth. Two-hundred thirty student-athletes from 23 U.S. universities have participated, and many have called it "the most life-changing experience [they] have ever had." None of this would have been possible had my college professor not decided to forgo his hesitations about athletes and give me an opportunity.

As student-athletes, we receive mixed messages from society. Throughout our childhoods, we are given trophies and medals for our athletic accomplishments, and if all goes well, the athletic success culminates in a scholarship to a university in the best higher education system in the world. But once at college, we do not have the same opportunities as non-athletes to acquire the interests and competencies necessary for finding and succeeding in fulfilling careers post-graduation. Most civic engagement and study abroad programs are at least 8-10 weeks in length, too long to accommodate athletic training schedules, if we even have the time to notice their existence in the first place.



Meanwhile, the NCAA advises us to “go pro in something other than sports,” but we often have no idea what that “something” should be. Professors lament that pressures to satisfy America’s fervent sports fan base create expectations of being athletes first, students second. In news headlines about college sports, negative stories dominate.

While college athletes are often seen in terms of their negative attributes, or the public relations “risks” they create for universities, I have experienced firsthand the unique positive qualities that athletes have. By virtue of their expertise in sports, they possess a currency with universal appeal, which can be exchanged in any region of the world, no matter how remote. In the most rural parts of developing countries, hard to reach by formal government initiatives, college athletes can serve as ambassadors of what is best about America. Via Coach for College, I have witnessed how they can overcome language and cultural barriers to form deep relationships with youth who cannot be reached by other means. They can dispel stereotypes, and foster trust and collaboration, even in countries with whom we were formerly at war. The abilities of college athletes to serve as role models, credibly convey sports-based life lessons and work together toward a common goal transcend the fierce athletic rivalries and other barriers that currently divide American universities. While Duke and UNC athletes may hate each other during athletic competitions in America, they relish working side by side in Vietnam to elevate the life trajectories of rural youth.

Despite the vast differences between the U.S. and Vietnam, kids in Vietnam find the athletes’ life experiences appealing. As Betsy Nilan, a participant in the 2010 CFC program, recounts, “I told the [kids] the story of how my rowing team at UVA trained and practiced everyday and finally after all our hard work we ended up winning a huge national competition and because of that my team got to meet President Obama and then we got classy championship rings. [My student] Canh thought it was the coolest thing ever - he stood up and gasped. He immediately wanted to shake my hand because he knew that President Obama, ten months earlier, had also shaken my hand. His face said it all. I could tell from that moment on he was determined to make something like that happen in his life.”

This occurrence would never have been possible 40-50 years ago,

when America was known to the Vietnamese only as an adversary and foreign invader. Now, thanks in part to the efforts of hundreds of American student-athletes, Vietnamese in at least some communities look upon America with warmth and friendship, and are inspired to strive for higher education. If college athletes like Betsy are shown and appreciated for the unique skills they possess, positive social change may emerge in places where we least expect it. And in the process, athletes can develop a new identity that sustains them once the cheers from sports fans have long faded.

## Biography

Parker Goyer founded the Coach for College program in 2008, through a fellowship with the Robertson Scholars Program, a program which seeks to foster leadership development among undergraduates and collaboration between Duke and UNC-Chapel Hill. As a member of the Duke University women’s tennis team from 2003-2007, she found it difficult to find the time or the avenues to participate in extensive service or cultural immersion opportunities in foreign countries. After trips to Vietnam and Belize in summer 2007, she realized the value of international civic engagement, and in particular the potential of student-athletes to serve as effective ambassadors of the United States as role models and coaches for youth. Upon her return, she sought to devise a program that would allow other student-athletes obtain a similar experience that would be compatible with their athletic training requirements. As an undergraduate Psychology and Neuroscience major, she was also interested in developing a psychologically-based intervention to help youth in developing countries. Consequently, she has used the findings of psychological research to inform the program’s design and curriculum.

In addition to serving as the director of the program for five years, she has also sought to evaluate the program through graduate work. As a Rhodes Scholar from 2009-2011, she obtained an MSc in International and Comparative Education and an MBA. Her master’s thesis at Oxford recently

will become a book chapter, which will be published in fall 2013.

She is currently pursuing a doctorate in education at Harvard via a Presidential Scholarship. Her dissertation is a comprehensive analysis of the program’s effect on Vietnamese youth, utilizing data gathered from a randomized controlled trial conducted in summer 2013.

