

ATHLETICS

Giving Student Athletes the Skills for Success

by chadhanna and danielhartman-strawn

Sitting in a windowless room in Tempe, Arizona, River Thompson listens intently as his coach breaks down footage of their upcoming opponent. He is a member of Arizona State University's Division I football team. Tireless work and commitment to his sport and school has gotten him here, but there's a good chance that Thompson, a 2011 graduate of East, would not be traveling to San Francisco with his teammates for the 2012 Kraft Bowl if he hadn't had the good fortune to meet Narcy and Ali Jackson.

Many students with massive potential walk the halls of East every day. Unfortunately, not all of these kids take advantage of their abilities. "We noticed a lot of athletes had a 2.0 grade average or less. They didn't understand the connection between their academic achievement, civic engagement, and athletic ability," explains Narcy Jackson. Wanting to do something about it, he and his brother, Ali, founded Athletics and Beyond (A&B) in 2005, a non-profit organization devoted to encouraging students to reach higher, specifically to aim for a college education.

Two Former East Students Recall their History

"My entire family has graduated from East," says Narcy Jackson, looking out at the clear fall sky and infinite mountaintops from the library at East High School, a place that he and Ali clearly feel a deep connection to. For them, school was a safe haven

during a time of uncertainty caused by gang violence in their neighborhoods, as well as the social hub of their lives.

When they attended East, disadvantaged students looking for their ticket to college received advice that actually set them up to fail. Ali was a very athletic kid, playing on the football team as well as wrestling for East. He was told a myth as a young, inner city youth that, "if you are talented athletically, that's all you need. [The kids] think they can disregard the academics. And that is just not the case."

The false message continues to be propagated by modern coaches and media, however. Ali knows from personal experience that the question then becomes, "what are these kids going to do now that football, or any other sport, is over. This is where our organization's work kicks in, and the community service, the job research, and their hard work in school widens their eyes to the possibilities."

Broadening Horizons

The organization has a mission of, in Narcy's words, "creating opportunity through exposure", and by exposing these kids to various things, like a college campus, and they can feel that energy and make the goal of college more tangible and realistic."

"We do a summer college tour," says Narcy, "where the kids go to UCLA, USC, CU, and CSU. We put them in a college atmosphere and around college athletes so that they can visualize themselves there." Another approach to encourage that visualization by A&B has been to tap their zealous group of alumni that have gone on to play football in college to visit aspiring athletes at East.

"We want younger students to hear their older role models telling them that they're going to class and that they're doing well in school," says Narcy, "this is why we created our cross-age mentoring program. When Ezekiel Bishop [an East and A&B alum who plays at ASU] or River Thompson walks up to these kids when they're working out, you should see how these kids respond to him."

Closing the Gap

When examining East's student-athletes' academics, "the achievement gap we noticed was primarily in the football program," says Narcy. So that's where they started, targeting incoming football players and offering them guidance through the transition into

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high school and over the subsequent years. Narcy explains that "a component of A&B is that we have a mentoring program, and

with that we have a 100% success rate with getting kids into college." They monitor their athletes' grades and ensure that they seek support from their teachers when they need it because, as Narcy reveals, "we found over the years that the kids don't even know much about the resources [available in the building]

Eric Bui is a senior at East and a member of the Student Advisory Council of A&B. He is a center for the East football team and, thanks in part to help from A&B, colleges such as Fort Lewis, Carleton, and CMS are looking him at. "A&B helps me stay on track with my school work and offers us help with SAT and ACT tutoring."

Classroom performance is essential to the long-term success of students because it makes them eligible for recruitment, a process overseen by the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). Senior Ryan Chavkin, who is a member of A&B's Student Board, explains, "qualifying involves clearinghouse, which is basically meeting all the NCAA academic standards." Minimum GPA and standardized test (SAT or ACT) scores are part of those requirements.

Athletics and Beyond began to host an annual workshop designed to help athletes successfully navigate the NCAA process. Former college coaches and student advocates spoke to a small crowd of mostly upperclassmen athletes and their families about the wide range of college athletics available (from smaller Division III schools to the better known Division I powerhouses), and the many resources available to help defray the cost of a college education. This can decide whether an athlete will ever step foot into a college.

Building Character

The emphasis Athletics and Beyond puts on "civic engagement" has led them to put on workshops that involve youth from the surrounding community by inviting them to the Boys Transition to MEN or Girls' Empowerment workshops, where they learn about how to be successful students. The groundwork that the organization does here helps these middle school students transition successfully to high school, regardless of their engagement in athletics.

To make these experiences meaningful and relevant, according to Narcy, they bring in notable local leaders such as, "Mayor Michael Hancock and his wife, and this year we have the police commissioner [Robert] White and the director of corrections for the sheriff's department. They talk about what they did to get into their careers."



& BEYOND

"A&B has made me into a bigger man," states Devon Zavala, a senior at East, "They taught me how to tie a tie, dog!" The organization further promotes responsibility and character by giving students like Bui and Elliston leadership roles. Zavala says that, "when Coach Ali or Narcy can't be there, we sort of step in and run things."

A&B's athletes work with the younger kids who come to these workshops in addition to completing a required 24 hours of service a year, though some

rack up more hours

than that. Narcy says that the cumulative effect is staggering, "last year alone we had 820 volunteer hours [total]."

Graduates like Thompson can now see how A&B gave them a, "good foundation in terms of high school and how to prepare. Going to class, getting the good grades, and just doing the right things, so you're prepared in college." This preparation is key, not only in getting accepted at a college, but excelling there as well.

Training

Offseason football training plays a major role in the program. The student athletes take the field at the Montbello Rec Center, which typically begins near the start of January. "Three weeks with Coach Ali and you'll be jacked!" adds Zavala, "he has helped me with my agility, footwork, and conditioning." For senior Mike Friend, these workouts helped him out at a time when he really needed it.

"During the summer I didn't have anything to do so Jordan Vaden [a past A&B student athlete currently playing wide receiver at CSU] took me to train with A&B," explains Friend, "The coaches have made me a better player than I've been in the past."

Being in top physical and mental shape is essential to surviving the highly demanding schedule of a college athlete, as River Thompson can attest: "we have meetings in the morning around seven or so for a couple of hours. That's film

[review], team [meetings] ... all that stuff. Then we usually have practice for a couple hours. It could be two and half to three hours. Then we have more meetings afterwards, then we lift, then we have classes after 1:30, after that you have film to watch, mentor meetings, tutors, [etc.]. It's like a job."

Looking Forward

It is important to keep things in perspective; only 0.09% of athletes who play high school football will go on to play professionally, about 1 in 10,000. However, as Narcy is quick to point out, "We want them [the participants] to understand that they are students before athletes."

If you ask River Thompson what his best football memory is, he won't hesitate: "getting my first letter was probably the coolest thing, to know that I could actually do something with this [skill]." Athletics and Beyond is beginning to expand into Arizona and Ohio, and with good reason: they have a winning method for helping students realize their dreams, athletic or otherwise. The tenacity their graduates are instilled with comes from the support they received as students: equal parts nourishment of their minds, bodies, and spirits.



(left) Mayor Hancock instructs students on the art of tying a tie; (below) Mayor Hancock poses with East athlete Louis Aldridge and Narcy Jackson, both of A&B.



Brothers and A&B co-founders Ali and Narcy Jackson

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