



Supporting Student-Athletes at Detroit Mercy

By Dr. Erin Bell, Assistant Director of Educational Development

As of fall 2023, approximately 300 student-athletes were enrolled in courses at Detroit Mercy. While most faculty are aware of the numerous athletics programs at the University, fewer may be familiar with how recent changes in college athletics impact student-athletes and their schedules. It is critical to understand the challenges all students face, especially these unique members of our University community.

[Steve Corder](#), Assistant Athletic Director for NCAA Compliance at Detroit Mercy, former assistant men's soccer coach, and Detroit Mercy graduate highlights the critical role that faculty play in the success of student-athletes — both on and off the field.

"I've been here 23 years and our faculty has been amazing. Our students' academic success rates are higher than almost every one of our peer institutions in terms of graduation rates, academic progress rates, GPAs, and team GPAs, and the majority of that is credited to the professors. They work with our student-athletes on many issues," notes Corder.

That being said, Corder underscores how important it is for faculty to understand the intricacies of athletics programs and how scheduling, technology, and other factors play a role in the student athlete's ability to succeed in college as the landscape of contemporary college athletics continues to change.

Corder notes that technology has impacted collegiate athletics in several significant ways. First, the introduction of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Transfer Portal technology has made tracking and recruiting transfer students much easier for coaches and program officials. The Portal, a compliance system created in 2018, manages and facilitates the process for student-athletes seeking to transfer between member institutions, allowing them to enter and transfer to other universities.

"It's made it much easier for coaches to understand who is trying to transfer and to actively recruit those students," says Corder, "so the transfer rate is up from about 20 to 25 percent." There are, however, challenges for both outgoing and incoming transfer students. "There are challenges just as much with someone leaving the program as with someone coming in and trying to figure out what credits will transfer," says Corder. New transfer students may require additional time and assistance as they work through their new schedule and plan of work at Detroit Mercy.



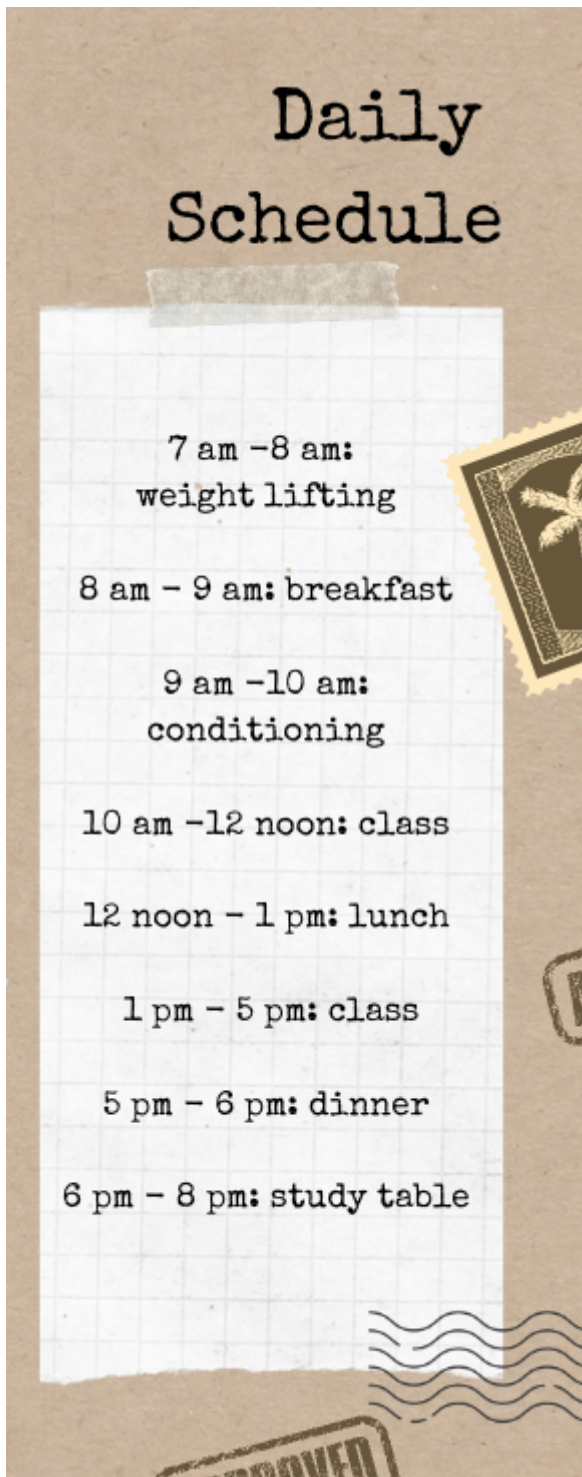
A misconception about student-athletes is that all student-athletes are on full scholarships so they don't have the stress of student loans or employment. The bottom line is that the majority of our athletes are only on partial scholarships and we have a lot that are not on any aid at all. They just want the opportunity to play Division I.

Another important issue impacting student-athletes is that athletic events are scheduled based on contractual obligations for streaming and broadcasting games and matches through media conduits. As Corder explains, Detroit Mercy's participation in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) means that ESPN live streams most Detroit Mercy games, impacting *when* the games can be scheduled. This, in turn, affects the student-athletes ability to attend courses at certain times and on certain days.

"In order to get ESPN to stream a game, it might have to be scheduled at 7 p.m. on a Thursday night under the lights," explains Corder. "Obviously, that will impact anyone with a Thursday night class." Thus, the ESPN schedule mandates when Detroit Mercy schedules games, meets, and matches, and not the other way around.

Another major component that impacts scheduling and travel times for athletes is NCAA conference realignment. "In the past," says Corder, "all the colleges that we competed with were in the Midwest and were private. . . and now we are the only private Jesuit school left in our conference." Due to conference realignment, Detroit Mercy teams may travel much further for games ranging from locales from Pennsylvania to Kentucky, among many others.

"We have the 48 hours over the weekend and a team might be traveling to Milwaukee and back," explains Corder. "Students may have to do their work on the bus, in a hotel room, or even when they get back to their dorm at a late hour. It is a different lifestyle for them, and I am not asking for any special treatment but we do want to ask for understanding and empathy."



In addition to travel time, student athletes' days and nights are filled with numerous activities. "Facilities give us limited options for practice times," says Corder. "We have everyone using the same field. Now that we have the lights it is a little bit easier, but a professor may not know that our women's soccer team comes in for treatment at 5:45 a.m., then after treatment, they are on the field for practice at 6:30 a.m., and if they have an 8



a.m. class.”

Having a strenuous two hours prior to class start may mean that the student-athlete appears less focused or has a lower energy level than others in the class.

Sophia Butkovich, a biology major who plays Midfield on the Women’s Soccer Team, reiterates such challenges. She recounts a recent weekend’s events: “I have a game at 4 p.m. but I have to get there around 12-1 p.m. and I won’t get back to my room until 8 p.m. I have a chemistry exam due that day so I have to find a time that game day to complete my exam as well as be at my game and mentally be “in the zone” for that. It definitely gets hectic for us. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday we have 6 a.m. practices, and Tuesdays and Thursdays we have lift at 7 a.m. as well as practice in the afternoon. Sometimes we’re going right from lift to class then to practice and then to class again. We’re pretty drained on a day-to-day basis.”

Tia Jolic, a Forward on the Women’s Soccer Team, concurs with Butkovich. “My biggest challenge is the mental tax and workload that is put on us. Most days, we are both practicing and going to class, rushing from one place to another, with not much time for ourselves. There are some days when we have practice in the morning, and I don’t get home until late in the afternoon. Along with the crazy schedule, it is easy to get lost in the season, and either your grades start dropping, or your athletic performance starts dropping. It is easy for an athlete’s mental health to start declining during college. It is a difficult schedule to work with while trying to stay optimistic and not lose our love for the sport.”

In the day-to-day, athletes have to implement strong structural, organizational, and communication skills as well as build and foster peer-to-peer relationships, problem-solving, and healthy conflict resolution, and leadership values in a diverse group, and they are taking those skills to their classrooms.

In order to support success in the classroom, Corder and athletic staff encourage the student-athletes to use a variety of active learning methods such as sitting in the front row of the class, actively engaging with course content and their classmates, and keeping the lines of communication with their professors open. These broader approaches are accentuated by required study times.

Taylor Blunt, a Guard on Detroit Mercy’s Women’s Basketball Team, is a member of the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) community. Blunt explains that “I am really interested in making it better for us student-athletes to grow academically. Additionally, I



want to make it easier for student-athletes to have access to educational components that can improve our experiences here on campus.”

One suggestion Blunt offers is to create a study room in Calihan Hall a room where study hall hours can be logged for convenience and support. “A lot of student-athletes on campus already study there and do homework because not only is it convenient,” notes Blunt, “but it is also a very nice study space complete with study tables, a whiteboard, comfy chairs, etc. Although student-athletes use the space a lot for homework, they don’t get credit for those hours because study hall hours are only logged at the Student Success Center in the Library.”

Butkovich also notes that it would be helpful if faculty offered flexible office hours policies via different modalities. “There are times when we have practice in the morning and that seems to be when most office hours are, or we have practice in the afternoon, we have games, we’re missing school for a couple of days, and we can’t attend the office hours” Butkovich states. “If instructors could even set up a Zoom call with a time that we could meet and explain what I missed or explain a few questions that I had, that would really help.”

In the end, Corder reiterates that at Detroit Mercy, most student-athletes are driven to succeed in academics. “A majority of our students are here to get a degree,” says Corder, “and athletics is just something that they *wanted* to do; they weren’t ready to stop. These athletes are really dialed in as students; the fact that they also participate in athletics is kind of an outlier over here because they want to keep playing at a high level of competition. That is something that we want our faculty to know.”

Corder hopes to foster a continued sense of collaboration between faculty, athletics program officials including coaches and administrators, and student-athletes. He encourages faculty and support staff to [make contact with him](#) and his team to discuss any challenges or innovative ideas to support student-athletes as they move forward.

“We’re all one team. We’re all Titans,” says Corder. “The student-athletes are prime catalysts in terms of pushing that mentality forward. We look forward to more collaborations between faculty, staff, athletics directors, and athletes to make sure the correct message is delivered: we are one unified Detroit Mercy nation.”