

Athletes such as football player Young Douglas '04 spend more time in the weight room than did students in earlier generations.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL BURKHART

NESCAC FIGHTS THE TREND BY WILLIAM L. HOLDER '75

AMHERST COLLEGE

BATES COLLEGE

BOWDOIN COLLEGE

COLBY COLLEGE

CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

HAMILTON COLLEGE

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

TRINITY COLLEGE

TUFTS UNIVERSITY

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

WILLIAMS COLLEGE

THE GAME CHANGES FOR INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

Fitness is a national obsession, as magazine racks will attest, and that's partly why several hundred students, faculty, and staff crowd the center every day. Among them are intercollegiate athletes who see strength training as an essential part of preparation to compete.

Frank Hauser '79, the university's head football coach, remembers that when he played football for Wesleyan, athletes had very different expectations. Few had access to good weight-training equipment in high school, so they had to be taught how to lift weights. The notion of training year-round was not prevalent. Particularly in Division III, athletes played more than one sport and did not worry overly

much about training out of season.

Back then, it was still common for a first-year student to arrive on campus and join a team as a walk-on without previously having been identified or recruited by a coach.

Today the walk-on is an endangered species in many sports. Nearly all athletes in some sports are recruited through an intensive selection process. Hauser and his associates, for example, review more than 700 videotapes submitted each year by potential recruits, some done with the aid of professional video-editing services. Recruits arrive at Wesleyan having trained with weights in high school (and, commonly, having paid attention to proper nutrition). Wesleyan's defensive line averages 265 pounds, compared to 215 pounds in Hauser's student days. Intercollegiate athletes are bigger and stronger than their predecessors and maintain their fitness year-round. Playing more than one sport is much more the exception than the rule.

"Years ago football players didn't worry about nutrition and out-of-season training," says Hauser. "When you came to football camp, you came to get in shape. Now you come in shape."

Athlete-specialists are by no means limited to football. Most of Coach Geoff Wheeler's soccer players have been playing nine months of the year on travel and club teams since they were kids—a longer game season than they will have at Wesleyan. As a basketball coach, Kate Mullen sees the trend in her players:

"The pre-frosh weight train in high school, which was unheard of even just five years ago. They're playing year-round; they're playing AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) basketball, and they're also playing on their high school team summer league. I'm not talking about just the elite athletes. I'm talking about students who might not make my team.

"If you don't have a year-round program, high school students think you're not serious," she adds. "In the pre-season we do lifting, the kids run sprints twice a week, and they play together a few times a week. I never have to nag recruits about weight lifting. They get a look in their eyes: that's what they want. When I was first here, I didn't say those things."

The training pays off in performance. Mullen's players are strong. They can sink long 3-point shots; they are less likely to suffer injuries from muscle stress.

Lukas Cash '01 exemplifies the trend, although he came to his sport late. As a sophomore at Xavierian Brothers High School in Boston, he began playing lacrosse. He lifted weights regularly with his father at the local YMCA, attended lacrosse camps, and played with an indoor lacrosse league in the winter. After graduating, he spent a postgraduate year at Exeter to gain more experience as a goalie. Originally convinced that he would play for a Division I school, he took his father's advice to choose a top liberal arts school instead.

Like most—but not all—athletes at Wesleyan, Cash engaged himself fully during his four years. He became interested in theater, which led his theater friends to come watch lacrosse games. He spent a summer in South Africa and Uganda working on humanitarian aid projects. "At Wesleyan you have to be multidimensional," he says.

Committed athletes such as Cash expect a lot of Wesleyan's intercollegiate program, but do they expect too much?

Director of Athletics John Biddiscombe worries about the ability of the institution to meet rising expectations. He reflected on the changing environment for intercollegiate athletics one afternoon just as 2,000 young people were arriving for a United States Swimming event. These swimmers, the cream of the crop nationally, participate in club programs with coaches paid by parents to maximize their children's athletic potential—and maybe to hype it.

"We have tried to hold out against specialization," he says. "We not only support the multi-sport athlete, we promote that. But we've been losing that game despite our greatest efforts.

"Students want to play one sport year-round, and this is one of the pressures we are facing. Year-round involvement challenges our resources, and, moreover, we are delivering an inconsistent message. We're saying to the athlete: We can't support or coach you out of season because NESCAC rules forbid that, yet we know you have to train out of season or you won't be competitive."

The pressures on intercollegiate programs have been building for years at NESCAC institutions, while their presidents and athletic directors have worked to uphold standards—sometimes taking considerable heat over issues such as limits on postseason competi-

Crew team members such as Erin Burchfield '02 spend long hours on rowing machines so that they can deliver a huge burst of energy and strength during a race.



At 4:30 p.m. on a February afternoon, the fitness rooms in the Freeman Athletic Center are jammed. Forget about getting on one of the two newest machines, \$4,500 elliptical cross trainers that let you simulate running up hills. Just finding a free exercise bike or a set of weights can be difficult. Barely more than a decade ago, when the athletic center opened, the fitness area was a showcase facility among colleges in the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC), but this is no longer true. Much of Wesleyan's equipment is aging and barely sufficient to meet demand—not always even that.

When they are not on the mat, wrestlers follow a carefully constructed regimen of strength-training exercises to prepare them for the intense exertion of their sport.



tion. The intensity of debate rose considerably with the publication last year of *The Game of Life* by James L. Shulman and former Princeton University President William G. Bowen, both with the Mellon Foundation. This highly regarded study of intercollegiate athletics and a follow-up study of NESCAC institutions (done at the request of NESCAC presidents) presented several unsettling conclusions.

Chief among them was that intercollegiate athletics has a much more significant impact on the admission process of Ivy League and Division III schools than on much larger institutions, such as those in the Big Ten. At NESCAC colleges, a quarter to a third or more of students participate in intercollegiate athletics, so these institutions recruit athletes proportionately to a much greater degree than larger universities. Athletes, say the study authors, enjoy an advantage in the admission process that dwarfs that enjoyed by any other group.

The authors also found that within the past two decades, the academic performance of athletes in certain high-profile sports has deteriorated compared to their peers. This is a marked contrast to earlier generations of athletes who performed just as well in the classroom as other students. Today, however, athletes in some of the most heavily recruited sports not only rank disproportionately in the low end of the class, but also perform less well than one would predict based on SAT scores. They tend to be less connected to faculty members and more isolated by athletic subcultures on campus (Biddiscombe says this latter trend is not prevalent at Wesleyan).

Many students, of course, exhibit both academic and athletic excellence. Wesleyan's most recent Rhodes Scholar, Kim-Marie Spence '00, was a track athlete. Volleyball star Alexis Keeler '02 was named a Division III Academic All-American and elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Every semester athletes distinguish themselves academically in less visible ways, and many feel as much at home performing, say, with the university orchestra as they do on the practice field. Nevertheless, students in the heavily recruited sports at Wesleyan are not immune to trends identified in *The Game of Life*.

The findings of Shulman and Bowen—their warning that institutions are engaged in an intercollegiate athletics arms race, resonated with the NESCAC presidents—who had been considering these same issues for some time. They have agreed to change the admission process so that athletic achievement confers no more weight than other nonacademic considerations, such as legacy status. Williams, Amherst, and Wesleyan have consented to pilot a reduction of about 10 to 20 percent in the number of students who would not have been admitted but for their athletic ability.


Wesleyan has a further goal, shared by the rest of

Rhodes Scholar Kim-Marie Spence '00



NESCAC, of improving the academic quality of those student-athletes admitted and matriculating, while maintaining a competitive athletic program, according to President Bennet.

The Ivy League institutions also are reconsidering their policies. The presidents of the eight institutions have asked their athletic directors to examine recruiting and the amount of time athletes spend on their sports, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The presidents are concerned about the level of intensity for training and competition, which has increased so much in recent years that athletes may have difficulty participating in other aspects of campus life.

To discuss the relationship between the intercollegiate athletic program at Wesleyan and the educational mission, *Wesleyan* magazine invited three key decision-makers to join a roundtable discussion. President Douglas J. Bennet, Athletics Director John Biddiscombe, and Dean of Admission and Financial Aid Nancy Hargrave Meislahn met February 7 in the president's office. An edited version of their discussion follows. 

“I was shocked when I found out,” Kim-Marie Spence '00 says. “I’m overwhelmed and overjoyed!”

The reaction is understandable. After all, being awarded a Rhodes Scholarship is the kind of honor most people only dream of—even people such as Spence, a magna cum laude graduate from Kingston, Jamaica. A former track athlete and record-setter in the 4x400 relay, she was a NESCAC Academic All-Star in women's track.

“The Rhodes was definitely my long-shot option, especially considering Jamaica only gets one Rhodes Scholar per year,” she says. “I certainly did not expect to get it.”

But that didn't stop Spence from applying for it—twice. She had applied last year but was unsuccessful. She believes that experience made her much more relaxed this time around.

“I felt very calm during my interview,” she says. “I approached interviewing as exploring my options rather than gunning to get it.”

The strategy paid off and now Spence is headed to Oxford, where she will matriculate in the Developmental Studies Program. She hopes to use what she learns to help her career with nonprofit organizations.

Before becoming a Rhodes finalist, Spence was working in Israel with Women Against Violence, a Palestinian women's organization that provides shelters and halfway houses for victims of gender-based violence. She is also working for the Global March Against Child Labour, which is coordinating its efforts to coincide with this year's World Cup Soccer matches.

The humanitarian work she has become involved in was not Spence's first career after graduating from Wesleyan. She quickly landed a job as an analyst at Lehman Brothers on Wall Street. But despite good pay and opportunities for rapid advancement, her heart wasn't in the work. After several months she decided she had to leave “a cushy, yet personally unsatisfying job to do what I feel committed to—women's rights, human rights, and development.”

“My experience at Wesleyan definitely helped me in getting the Rhodes,” she says. “The selectors commented on my strong commitment to humanity and my strong belief system. These qualities were honed at Wesleyan.”

Spence is the third Wesleyan graduate to receive a Rhodes scholarship since 1987.

RETURN TO THE HIGH GROUND

The New England Small College Athletic Conference is reassessing the place of intercollegiate sports in this group of the nation's leading liberal arts institutions.

PRESIDENT BENNET: The NESCAC presidents all feel that we have a mission: to go back to the high ground in admissions and to compete with each other with teams composed as our student bodies are composed. In most sports, this is what we do, but in some sports there has been slippage in admission standards. We are trying to reestablish the idea of scholar-athletes as people who excel in the classroom and on the field. We don't know whether others will follow us; that's not why we're doing this. Nor is this issue driven by *The Game of Life*; it's been alive in NESCAC for a long time. I'd rather have Wesleyan be part of a shining example of athletics and academic success than follow the crowd. Applicants are going to have to understand that; parents and alumni are going to have to understand that.

NANCY HARGRAVE MEISLAHN: *The Game of Life* has landed in a cultural context, not just on college campuses, but in an American society that some would call sports-obsessed. The issues of health and sport, contest and conquest are very much a part of American culture—from the dominance of the sports pages in the media to the impact of soccer moms on an election.

JOHN BIDDISCOMBE: This kind of controversy is not new. Teddy Roosevelt said you have to clean up college athletics, or we're going to disband it because there are too many deaths in football. In the '50s and '60s, we had betting scandals. Now we have kids specializing and being coached from a very early age. Their parents are hiring people to help them write their athletic résumés or be agents for them. Athletes sent our football coach 700 videotapes, many of which he did not request.

MEISLAHN: The book surprised some people with the issue of specialization in sport. You have fewer and fewer three-sport athletes in high school.

You have young men and women who have specialized in one sport in elementary school. They have lots of time, lots of family resources invested in a particular talent in addition to their academics.

I was in Phoenix at an independent school, and a mom, a college professor, asked me whether she should find \$3,000 because other families in this school were paying that to professionals to put together videotapes of their children in athletics. I said, gosh no. Our coaches would like to see a game tape, but just send us the tape. It doesn't need to be professionally produced.

BIDDISCOMBE: Narration, music in the background.

MEISLAHN: The athletes we're seeing are, by and large, not the well-rounded individuals a lot of people thought still populated college campuses.

BENNET: Everybody of my generation remembers the star quarterback who was the star in English class as well. I'll stress again that NESCAC has been firmly committed for a long time to competing with teams that represent the entire student body; it's the basic principle. The NESCAC presidents meet three times a year to talk about how to maintain this kind of competition.

BIDDISCOMBE: What's unique with NESCAC is that we have a group of presidents who are willing to make a decision based upon their principles. Most often in college athletics, everyone articulates what needs to be done, but no one is willing to make a decision. Throughout the entire athletics community of more than 1,000 schools in all divisions, I'd say barely more than one percent is willing to do that.

BENNET: It was no surprise at all to the NESCAC presidents when the book came out saying that there had been slippage all over the country and that our schools were the most vulnerable because we try to give athletic opportunities to such a large number of students. Nearly 25 percent of our students compete in intercollegiate athletics.

MEISLAHN: The number of sports we are attempting to support is a distinctive feature of NESCAC schools. For small schools to be fielding 27 or 29 teams is significant in lots of ways. It's a wonderful demonstration

of what we believe, yet it certainly puts pressures on resources within the institutions, including admission. The places people think of as having big-time sports, the Big Ten, for example, actually compete in a fairly small number of sports.

BENNET: Our standard [promulgated this year by the NESCAC presidents] is that an individual's athletic excellence should be given weight in the selection process, but no more weight than other nonacademic factors, such as being the son or daughter of an alumnus or alumna.

MEISLAHN: NESCAC is the most competitive conference academically and athletically within Division III. We are in a unique leadership position to show we can self-regulate: that we can find the balance between athletics and academics that allows us to be excellent in both.

BENNET: People could choose to do this in other leagues. There is discussion within Division III of possibly creating some new subdivisions that would be consistent with schools like ours.

BIDDISCOMBE: The essence of the discussion is whether there is a critical mass of colleges that would de-emphasize the length of the playing season, would de-emphasize out-of-season practice, that would look for less emphasis on national championships. Let those schools self-select under this rubric. The practical problem is geographic location. You have to be able to compete on a daily basis. You can't be flying from New England to California.

BENNET: The Little Three have decided that in this admission year we are going to limit to 66 the number of admitted students whose primary credentials are in athletics (a 10- to 20-percent reduction). We are going to try to work toward a situation two to three years out where we are really fulfilling the intent of the NESCAC charter regarding admission and everything else.

MEISLAHN: It will take some time to change course. We hope that we can put in place some processes and monitoring compliance that will work not just with the Little Three, but also across the NESCAC league. We're not there yet.

It's also important that we have our own internal goals. This year in admission there are three: to decrease the number of students who are admitted primarily for their contributions in athletics; to improve the academic quality of admitted athletes; to demonstrate that there is a process for monitoring compliance that makes sense, that is not overly burdensome, and that is not discriminatory toward athletes. We don't want a different admission process for athletes. We want the same rigorous process and overall goals.

BIDDISCOMBE: It will be challenging for our coaches too: We see both opportunity and a need to extend our contacts. We will track students earlier in the application process and extend our geographical reach. The students who meet the profile make up a small pool: among the very best students and also able to play in the most competitive Division III conference in the nation.

MEISLAHN: We're very happy with the academic qualifications of most of our athletes. Our coaches, however, will need to recruit very actively to find more students who bring multiple talents and are prepared to engage fully at Wesleyan. I'd like to think that there are more student athletes out there who don't know about Wesleyan and would bring those talents. Currently our coaches generate several hundred applications, and lots of them are students we in the admission office wouldn't know about otherwise.

BENNET: We also have to say that while the overall academic performance of athletes in most sports at Wesleyan is terrific, there are pockets, which are a result of admission practices, where some recruited athletes in specific sports perform much worse academically than the rest of the student body.

Again, this is not an issue with all athletes. My niece Emily was on the women's swimming team, which received an award for having the highest academic average in its category. But in some specific sports, there are kids who can't do Wesleyan academics and sports and all the other things necessary to participate in the community successfully. This discussion will be confused if people don't acknowledge the large concessions that have been made in academic preparation for some student athletes and the subsequent academic difficulties they experience here.

BIDDISCOMBE: We need to say that part of our goal on a team is for everyone to have at least a 3.0 average. I'm not sure we're doing that as well as we can. Division I does many things wrong in my view, but one thing some of the schools do well is to help athletes improve their academic performance and graduate. We can learn from the Division I model and adapt lessons to our style at Wesleyan to help our athletes perform better academically. The prep schools do this terrifically. They accept average students and turn them into very good students through a lot of specialized help.

BENNET: Part of our admission strategy is making Wesleyan more and more competitive. We have to be able to go out to athletes and say: Come to Wesleyan; it's a great school; you will be able to participate in sports in a way that you wouldn't at bigger schools. You can be the captain of the team here. John, you have brought Wesleyan athletics to the point where our win-loss record is much better: We were winning 42 percent of the time five years ago and are winning 55 percent of the time now. That's an impressive advance. I want us to be fully competitive in the Little Three.

BIDDISCOMBE: And during this time, the conference has become more competitive. Several of the teams we're playing are ranked in the top 10 of all Division III

BENNET: We need to do this to be fair to the athletes. The data for NESCAC show that, increasingly, the athletes recruited to our schools do not think they are coming with an academic purpose.



Roundtable participants John Biddiscombe, director of athletics; President Douglas J. Bennet; and Nancy Hargrave Meislahn, dean of admission and financial aid.

schools in the nation. To make any significant gain is extremely difficult.

BENNET: As we discuss athletics, we also have to clarify what we are aiming for as an academic institution. We have to clarify what kind of commitment we have in athletics; we have to clarify our commitment to winning. Then we have to clarify our commitment to our student athletes. By doing so we will get a much more consistent and more successful athletic program.

MEISLAHN: We also need clarification of expectations during the recruitment process. This is one area where we can do better. We've talked about engaging faculty more in recruitment. One of the initiatives that John has embarked on this year is having faculty advisers for the teams so that those advisers can interact with prospective

student athletes and clarify the academic expectation.

BENNET: We need to do this to be fair to the athletes. The data for NESCAC show that, increasingly, the athletes recruited to our schools do not think they are coming with an academic purpose. They think they are coming to perform a service for the school as an extremely good football or soccer player.

The challenge we face reminds me of NPR [where Bennet was president in the 1980s]. I love that we were able to run a first-class, self-sustaining broadcast news operation in the face of commercial competition. We did better than they did. The contrarian in me says that there is a great opportunity here to do wonderful athletic competition—as well as have well-coached athletes who are academically equal to the rest of the student body.

MEISLAHN: I would argue that we may find another generation of Bill Belichick out there (class of '75). He is touted as a football genius who took an underdog team to the Super Bowl, and part of that achievement was a marvelous undergraduate experience, a love of athletics, a finely tuned mind.

BENNET: There is one big risk as we go forward: People who follow Wesleyan athletics don't necessarily have all the data and aren't used to thinking about athletics as it is portrayed in *The Game of Life*. They were here when the scholar-athlete model worked in full force and may not appreciate the change that has happened in some sports.

The book may not all be correct, but the broad brush strokes are. The NESCAC is part of the system and it has some deficiencies. If people can acknowledge that but see that we're going to build our way past them, then they should support what we are doing. If people feel that athletic success for places like Wesleyan should look more like Division I, then they are in the wrong school.

BIDDISCOMBE: We need to be very careful that students who are serious about academics and also came here because Wesleyan has a serious

approach to athletics don't get categorized, that people are not singling them out and saying they are less capable than others. By and large that is not the case.

MEISLAHN:. It's so critical that cooperation in this process to change admission goals is league-wide.

BIDDISCOMBE: And that it remain a transparent process. And that the leadership at the presidential level remains as strong as the presidential leadership is at the Little Three. One of the challenges is that we have many new presidents in the NESCAC group.

BENNET: As far as I can tell, they are very committed to this objective. I am confident that we will succeed. The NESCAC is a national model for how to integrate athletics into outstanding academic programs. Our work will make this model even more compelling. 