

DARTMOUTH ATHLETICS

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Letter to the Valley News from Dartmouth professor Alan Stam (as yet untenured)

In its Dec. 17 editorial that expressed support for Dartmouth Dean of Admissions Carl Furstenberg, the Valley News opined that, "(I)t's hard to grasp the rationale for excluding that budding poet or philosopher in preference to a recruited athlete if providing a world class education is your mission." Hard indeed. That is, if one falls prey to a couple of dubious assumptions.

First, to assert that recruited athletes have less value we must assume that recruited athletes cannot be budding poets or philosophers. Second, even if the first is true, we must also assume that budding poets and philosophers add more to other students' education than do the athletes on campus. Not having access to the private information that one would need to actually base such judgments in fact, I can rely only on my own experiences, both as a varsity athlete in Cornell University's rowing program and as a tenured professor in Dartmouth's Government Department.

Regarding the first, the students I rowed with at Cornell have now gone on to be physicians, engineers, university professors, investment bankers and real estate developers, among other professions. I honestly do not see any difference in the relative value of a discussion dissecting the views of Hegel or Foucault versus a conversation analyzing the most efficient rowing stroke, although the results of the latter will be subject to an empirical test on Saturday morning while the former will simply vanish into the ether at dawn's first light.

Among my valued friends in the Upper Valley whom I count on both for camaraderie as well as the occasional helping hand, a majority are



former college athletes. The bankers, doctors, architects, builders and writers I hang out with today were football players, track stars, soccer players, oarsmen and skiers back in the day.

It is true that our academic performance as undergraduates likely suffered to some degree because of the long hours we committed to being the best athletes we could. The time spent running, lifting weights and rowing in the dark came from somewhere, and I often chose to sleep, eat and prepare for races than put in the extra hours studying that would have been needed to maintain the highest possible grades.

In those hours of extraordinary physical effort shared with 20 other young men, I also learned things about life that those meeker souls cloistered in the library still do not understand. You'll have to ask my current students and colleagues, both the jocks and the poets, if the sacrifice had any long-term deleterious effect on my performance today, whether standing at the lectern or publishing in scholarly journals.

To accomplish extraordinary things in life, very often one must work harder than one could ever imagine, and do so in cooperation and absolute trust with other like-minded people. That sense of shared mission, sacrifice and achievement simply cannot be gained from reading about it in a book or talking about it in some all-night bull session. To learn that you can rise to the most difficult occasions and challenges that life will throw at you, you must actually do them rather than simply contemplate them. Only my prior service as an enlisted man in the U.S. Army, another group that the intellectual effete looks down upon, better prepared me for life's real challenges — as compared with imagined ones — than did my experiences preparing for and racing in eight-man shells.

At the end of the day, we also must realize that in this discussion about the value of athletics versus intellectualism, in most every instance we are talking about a tradeoff between one relatively mediocre performer versus another. While community leaders and academic administrators spout nonsense about everyone being above average or, in the case of an elite educational institution, that everyone present is truly extraordinary, the truth is that only the astonishingly rare Ivy League student-athlete will become a

professional. In the big scheme of things, the vast majority are merely competent athletes, as well as being good students.

The same, however, is true of those budding philosophers and poets. The undergraduate poet, as well as the athlete, will wake up one day and realize he or she must go to work in the real world. Only a minuscule proportion go on to actually make their living writing poetry or philosophizing. The question is which way of spending time in college better prepares our students for their future roles in our community? Through the shared sacrifice and exultation found in organized sports and competition, or in the pedantic and nitpicking conversations of collegiate sophists?

I'll take the mediocre athletes over the mediocre poets and navel-gazers any day. I often wonder if the loathsome dismissiveness with which America's intellectuals view athletes, soldiers, business people and politicians lies in their own insecurities rather than any better sense of judgment they might have than the rest of us.

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