

A Different World

Athletes struggle with status as role models

By Dane Stickney
Staff writer

A few years ago, a Nike TV commercial featured Charles Barkley, who grabbed a rebound, turned to the camera and said, "I am not a role model."

The commercial stirred debate about the expectations of athletes to act as role models.

With their large amounts of national prestige, NU athletes often find themselves as role models. But is it fair for them to be shown in this light?

Dan Alexander, an NU running back, said because he puts himself in a prestigious role he must be willing to be responsible.

"If you accept the praise and admiration and put yourself in the limelight, then you've got to accept the responsibility that comes along with that," he said. "No one is worthy of being a role model, but a lot of athletes are expected to be one. I just try and be the best person I can be."

Jaime Krondak, a former outside hitter for the NU volleyball team, said it's an athlete's obligation to be a positive role model.

"It's almost your duty because you're in the spotlight, and so many people are looking up to you," she said. "They know what you're doing on the court, they know what kind of student you are and they see how you react to a lot of different situations."

"By being a student athlete, it's almost inevitable that you're going to have to be a role model."

Bobby Newcombe, a junior wingback on the NU football team, said the demand for college athletes to be role models is perplexing.

"Most people don't know me," Newcombe said. "I don't know how I could be a role model to them when they just know that I run well with the football."

"But if I am a role model, then that's fine, but I'm just going to live my life and be myself."

Newcombe said he thought Barkley made a good point with his commercial.

"I think he showed that one athlete cannot be a

complete role model," he said. "A basketball player might want to do some things like Charles Barkley, but not everything."

Newcombe urged young people to find a role model they could sympathize with and understand.

"No athlete can be a good role model just by being on TV," he said. "A role model has to be a person who you can get to know, so you can look at their struggles and see what they've learned from them."

Newcombe said he knew he would be in the spotlight when he came to Nebraska. His father expressed some concern because Newcombe was only 17 when he enrolled in college.

"My dad felt like I might have needed an extra year because playing football at Nebraska can put on a lot of extra pressure."

Krondak said she likes inspiring young people.

Her journey to becoming a role model started her freshman year when she began speaking for D.A.R.E., a program aimed at keeping children away from drugs and alcohol.

"It was fun speaking to elementary school kids about things like dreams, goals and the importance of education," she said.

Alexander has also spoken to various schools and groups about being a good citizen. His efforts have won him a slew of national good citizenship awards, but he said his positive influence is more important than the awards.

"When I talk to kids, I try to teach them to be drug-free and to avoid negative peer pressure," he said. "I'm just thankful for what God's given to me, and I try to use my gifts to give back to others."

Alexander said some athletes take their influence for granted.

"When I sign an autograph, it's not just a souvenir," he said. "I'm giving my word to be the best role model. Most guys just sign their names and don't even think about it."

Alexander said he has seen some football players who have been negative role models.

But for the most part, athletes are willing to accept the responsibility of being role models, Alexander said.



"About half the team quietly portrays a positive image by not getting in trouble and leading a good life," he said. "About one-fourth actively try to make things better and improve the image of the club and Nebraska as a whole."

Krondak said the influence of the volleyball team on young girls is different from the football team, because the players are more accessible and there is a need for positive female role models.

"Women's athletics have basically been coming on within the last 10 years," she said. "It's important that we introduce young ladies to the value of athletics and get to know them on a personal basis."

Krondak said she is still a role model even though her volleyball-playing days are over.

"I went to the (high school) state volleyball tournament, and people swarmed around me and talked to me even though I'm not playing anymore," she said. "I still have that image to uphold."

Newcombe said he has taken the responsibility of being a role model, but he wished some things could be different.

"I've accepted the fact that I'm a role model, but people need to remember that I have a brain on top of my head, too," he said. "I do more than just run with the football. I think I'm a pretty cerebral individual."

Isolation, practice change athletes' lives

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The Life of an Athlete

Athletes at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln lead different lives. They hang out with each other and have different priorities.

According to some, there are two separate facilities at UNL — the Hewit Center for athletes and the residence halls and union for everyone else.

The Hewit is a crutch for many athletes during the first years of college.

Athletes require separate, more convenient facilities, according to the athletic department and the athletes. This is the purpose of the Hewit Center.

Most athletes spend their day going to class, practicing and hanging out with other athletes at the Hewit, which is located under Memorial Stadium.

The University of Nebraska Athletic Department and its athletes maintain that the academic support, tutors and separate facilities are there for athletes' convenience.

"We understand what they are trying to get through and some of the needs they have," said Dennis Leblanc, associate athletic director of academic and student services. "Athletes have different needs. I'm not saying they are more or greater. I'm just saying they are different."

"Some would say they are not getting the full college experience — but they are getting a different experience."

Some also would say the athletic department takes athletes as impressionable, eager freshman, shoves them under Memorial Stadium and, four years later, they emerge sheltered, codded and out of touch with life.

Leblanc sees it differently. "It's however you look at isolation. People say, 'Isn't it terrible that the Athletic Department hides their athletes under the stadium.' Is it terrible if a fraternity or sorority does it?"

"Take Eric Crouch or Bobby Newcombe. When they walk in here, nobody cares."

The Hewit Center

The cafeteria — the Training Table — serves great food.

Athletes have a weight room at their disposal. The computer lab is top-notch and has about 50 computers encased in wood study carrels. Access to a computer where athletes can type in a subject area and get a list of tutors is unlimited.

The perks are obvious.

While many athletes agreed they were happy to have the Hewit, some said it could hinder campus interaction, especially during freshman year.

"I've never been to the union except to get my books. It's just convenient. It's just all right here," Fuente said.

Gymnast Heather Brink said she used the free tutors and counselors a lot her first few years at UNL.

"That was very nice," the senior business major said of the system. "I don't know if other people get free tutors."

"We get benefits by being athletes. Other people don't usually have that benefit to have a person tell you 'This is the class you should take.'"

Brink said tutors do more than help with classes.

"If there's something you don't have there and you need, they're willing to get it for you," she said.

Basketball player Nicole Kubik said she likes the easy access to tutors and the built-in assistance network that comes with the center.

"The support is great," she said. "It's just a convenience thing for us — if we were running around all over the place, it would just take time we don't have."

Newcombe, a junior business management major, said he thinks while the

Hewit is a good crutch, most athletes would survive without it.

"I think a lot of athletes would be just fine if they didn't have it, but with all the added stressors involved, it's definitely needed. It's very appreciated," Newcombe said.

Softball player Jennifer Lizama said as a senior, she doesn't spend as much time at the Hewit, but she still feels sheltered.

"You eat here. You study here. (The students at the Hewit are) most of your friends. That's who most of my friends

"I still think I'm sheltered from what goes on and what (other) students are doing."

Jennifer Lizama
NU softball player

were," Lizama said. "I still think I'm sheltered from what goes on and what (other) students are doing."

Dinko Verzi, a former NU tennis player and fifth-year senior, said he thought heavy reliance on the Hewit for support might not be a good thing.

"(Coaches) don't force you to go there," said Verzi, a senior biochemistry major. "They know it's a good place to be at, and they promote it. Maybe (athletes) should be encouraged to go out to other places, just so they mix with other students."

Newcombe, a junior who took 16 hours last semester, said after hours of practice each day he usually doesn't stick around the Hewit.

"I have to get away," he said. Brink said the schedule of being an athlete makes it seem natural to hang out with teammates.

"It's just like anything else," Brink said. "You spend so much time with them that you can't help but hang out with them. It's kind of a given."

Aside from easing athletes' pressures, Leblanc said the Hewit Center is paid for by money athletes generate.

"If we had an athletic department generating the money that this one is generating and we weren't providing something for athletes, it probably wouldn't be a real positive thing," Leblanc said.

Different lives and pressures

Although Brink said she has had experiences similar to Kubik and Newcombe, her life as an athlete has not been the same.

When most people think of athletes, she said, they think of football players or basketball players.

"It's different for me. I'm not Bobby Newcombe or Eric Crouch. I don't walk into class and everyone says, 'Oh my God.' Nobody knows who I am," Brink said. "I hear a lot of rumors about people saying how athletes, you know, are in this different category than everyone else, and we try to hide ourselves. I don't think that's it at all."

She said she hears people say athletes don't go to class and get easy grades because they are athletes. That's not the case, either, she said. And they don't party any more — if anything, they party a lot less — than most students do.

When Brink does go out, she said she doesn't know a lot of people.

She said she doesn't party a lot. She practices 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. each Sunday.

"You don't want to go out and get drunk and then come to workout looking like crap," she said.

Isolation

"A lot of people think that we are isolated," said NU quarterback Eric

Crouch. "To me, I'm just doing what any other normal person would do. I am doing what I enjoy doing. I enjoy football."

"I wouldn't say that we are isolated, but I don't think about that a lot."

Most Big 12 schools have facilities similar to the Hewit, Leblanc said, because athletes at every university need extra support.

"It's not purposely isolation," Leblanc said. "It's not necessarily what the athletic department (does), that's how society has set (the athletic system) up."

When athletes are practicing 20 hours or more a week, have civic responsibilities and are scrutinized for their athletic performance, they need someone to turn to, he said.

"I need to have my space," Newcombe said.

Leblanc compares the department to the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska or the greek system with one difference.

"It just happens that the athletic department is more established because of the visibility," Leblanc said.

Kubik said the Hewit and the athletic department get more attention outside of the organization than places such as the Nebraska Union or sororities and fraternities get.

"(Non-athletes) have the same benefits we have," Kubik said. "It's just not as publicized. I don't think they are jealous of us. It's just talked about more."

Kubik said just because the Hewit is there, athletes don't have to use it.

"I think it's up to the person. If they want to get out, they can," Kubik said.

Leblanc said regardless of the Hewit, regardless of whom athletes hang out with or where they get their tutors, most athletes could make it on their own just fine.

"There are going to be athletes (who excel) whether they have the Hewit Center (or not)," Leblanc said. "I'd like to think it has been a significant role in helping Nebraska be a premiere athletic department."