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It Takes Muscle

By LAURA PAPPANO

ON the last day of classes, Meredith Cohen is five hours east of Lafayette College, in Room 307 of the Comfort Inn in Worcester, Mass., doing two things most would consider antithetical. She is trying to relax and get hydrated before running the 400 meter in the Patriot League Track and Field Championships — and she is headed full throttle into finals week, banging out the first of five papers and a written summary of a college internship experience.

“I keep looking and thinking, ‘I have five papers!’ ” says Ms. Cohen, a junior who has a double major in English and French and a 3.57 grade point average. “But Coach yesterday said in the sprinter group meeting: ‘You are here now. You left all that at school.’ ”

Lafayette is one of eight teams gathered for two days of competition at Hart Field on the campus of the College of the Holy Cross.

Autumn Karweil, a biology major at Lafayette, sits in the stands above the track, flipping through index cards for her final in comparative vertebrate neuroanatomy. “I have exams Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,” says Ms. Karweil, who runs the 1,500 meter. “I can’t really take a weekend off.”

At a nearby Best Western, Gillian Nordquist, a Bucknell freshman, is already in exams, reporting at 7:45 a.m. to the kitchenette counter in Room 604 for a three-hour cultural anthropology final before she runs the 10,000 meter. Her coach, Kevin Donner, is overseeing a dozen athletes taking eight different exams at the hotel. “I look at it as a privilege we are able to proctor the exam on the road,” he says.

Exams on the road? Athletes are finding that academics and sports are two often conflicting masters.

Certainly there are stars for whom college is merely preparation for the N.F.L. or the N.B.A. But most student athletes are not bound for the pros. Like Ms. Cohen and Ms. Nordquist, they love their sport but also care about their grades (and not just for eligibility). They have serious majors like neuroscience. They do problem sets on airplanes and study on the sidelines. And while it has never been easy, it is getting tougher to juggle sports and studies, particularly for the 148,000 students who compete in Division I, the most competitive in the National College Athletic Association.

The steady march toward more and better play is claiming more time, energy and attention. Once extracurricular activities, even low-profile sports like softball and rifle dominate students’ social circles, schedules and even majors.

“If you are on a team, coaches own your day,” says Edward F. Etzel, a psychologist and associate professor in sports studies at [West Virginia University](#). Mr. Etzel has counseled student athletes since the mid-1980’s and watched sports take over many of their lives. Athletes who once practiced only during the season now train year round, and to stay competitive, they play in noncollegiate tournaments over the summer.

During the season, the [N.C.A.A.](#) caps the time coaches can hold practices to 20 hours a week — but that doesn’t count travel, team study halls, entertaining recruits, or treatment for injuries or physical therapy. It doesn’t include time athletes put in on their own.

The cap is also tough to enforce. It’s an open secret that some coaches hold “voluntary” practices that are not voluntary, use informal “captain’s practices” to add workouts, or employ the don’t-ask-don’t-tell approach. An N.C.A.A. subcommittee on athletes’ well-being reported in January that “there is widespread belief that the 20-hour rule in many programs is routinely violated.” While the subcommittee agreed to discuss refinements, it said the problems had less to do with inadequate rules than with coaches’ failure to take athletes’ academic priorities seriously.

Pamela Richardson, a May graduate of W.V.U., was on the track team. At meetings of student representatives from the Big East conference, she says, she heard many complaints about coaches’ breaking the 20-hour rule. Some coaches, she says, “don’t understand we are here for two reasons.”

But athletes have little recourse when a coach controls their scholarship money and has little accountability. “Coaches may abuse the amount of time they are supposed to have practices, but then athletes don’t say anything,” she says. “Who are they going to tell?”

The larger matter, however, is not stretching rules but what has become the ordinary in-season expectations of playing a college sport.

Pamela Childs, head softball coach at the [University of Vermont](#) who retired in June after 21 years, says long Vermont winters mean the first 28 games of the season are on the road. The team bus pulls out Friday afternoon, arriving for double-header play on Saturday and another game Sunday before returning to campus. Rain-outs eat into Mondays.

“Honestly, as a coach, I can’t say they don’t make some compromises academically, because they are missing a certain number of classes,” Ms. Childs says. She believes in the strong-mind, strong-body ideal that sport at this level is supposed to epitomize. She has ordered the bus to leave late so five players wouldn’t miss an anatomy class again.

At the same time, she has experienced the thrill — and conflict — of watching the stature of women’s softball grow. Her own job has changed: she coached field hockey in the fall and softball in the spring until softball became a full-time coaching job eight years ago. Last year she added a full-time assistant coach.

But bigger programs have bigger aspirations.

“To me this whole collegiate thing should be about them learning and experiencing,” she says. “I

kind of feel we are moving toward just winning.”

Put some blame on colleges, eager for the publicity and the glory attached to winning teams. In a speech last January, Myles Brand, the N.C.A.A. president, warned of an athletics arms race: in the last several years Division I expenditures have increased at two to three times the rate of overall university spending.

Public interest in once-minor teams has also blossomed with the arrival of Internet and television outlets dedicated to college sports, including College Sports Television Networks, Fox College Sports and ESPNU. Last month, the Big 10 announced it would create a 24-hour cable network, the first for an athletic conference. Many see in this a positive development for sports once eclipsed by men’s basketball and football. The big-business quality of those sports, however, is spilling over into others, none more so than women’s basketball. Games are now broadcast in prime time, and ratings and media coverage have exploded.

While the Patriot League, Lafayette’s conference, was formed in 1984 to guard the balance between academics and athletics, the pressure to improve is leading members to offer more athletic scholarships. Daniel Weiss, president of Lafayette, says they will start offering them in men’s basketball this season, to be followed by field hockey and men’s soccer.

“It got harder and harder for us to compete,” explains Mr. Weiss, who favors the scholarships even as he complains about the “obsession with athletic celebrity” at institutions of higher education. “Nationally,” he says, “the problem is — with the alumni especially — they all want to be better than last year.”

Even sports that don’t attract much attention know their mission is to win. “Over all, we are a very small piece of the pie here,” says the [University of Nebraska](#)’s rifle team coach, Launi Meili. “But people who read the paper want to know that we’re good. They may not spend a lot of time coming to watch us, but knowing we are successful, they take pride in that.”

The effect on students is mixed. The raised profile of women’s basketball recognizes the high quality of play and is a step toward gender equality. Being part of that is exciting, but it’s tough on scholar athletes.

Heather Claytor, a sophomore shooting guard for the women’s basketball team at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has gotten to bed at 4 a.m. after returning to campus from an away game, and then had to be up for a 9 a.m. psychology class. As a high school student in Grottoes, Va., Ms. Claytor had done a mentorship with a doctor and wanted to become a pediatrician. But once at U.N.C., where she is on an athletic scholarship, she put aside her pre-med aspirations. “Basketball takes up so much time,” she says, noting that pre-season training begins in August and runs until the regular season, November to April. “I would have to wait until the whole basketball thing is over to get into anything as serious as that.” For now, she is planning to major in exercise and sports science.

To an extent far beyond what is available to rank-and-file students, athletes enjoy individual

hand-holding to improve their chances of graduating on time — an N.C.A.A. priority. Ms. Claytor is grateful for the perks, including tutors who travel with the team and academic advisers to keep them on track. Her need to focus on basketball is plain: the scholarship, which she cannot afford to lose, is good for one year at a time. “It motivates me to work harder because nothing is guaranteed,” she says. “You want to work your hardest to get asked next year.”

THE very rhythm of an athlete’s day leaves little room for late-night pizza, clubs or simply hanging out. At the beginning of her sophomore year, Kristina Fehlings, a member of the University of Nebraska rifle team — and the 2006 N.C.A.A. air rifle champion — decided to join a sorority.

“Everything was piling up,” recalls Ms. Fehlings, now a senior. “You have to be a member of different clubs within the sororities, to decorate banners and plan things.”

When she got a C on an accounting test, she turned to teammates for advice. They gathered at a whiteboard in the team meeting room and helped her chart pros and cons of the sorority. “I had one pro and this huge list of cons,” she says. She quit the sorority.

A chart of the sports pros might include benefits like being able to juggle tasks more efficiently, having coveted entries for résumés and learning on the field. Ms. Fehlings believes that relaxation training for her sport helps when she takes tests. “I can calm myself and tell myself I know what I am doing,” she says. And sports forges relationships that provide important support.

Ms. Fehlings is not the only athlete to claim that “my closest friends are my teammates because we go through it all together.”

But such connections can also create a troubling isolation. Officials have made the integration of athletes into the student body a subject of essays and conference talks. Questions remain about the rape allegations made by a stripper hired to perform at a [Duke](#) lacrosse team party on March 13. But these facts remain: the lacrosse players hired a stripper and drank excessively. During spring semester there were national headlines about athletes behaving badly; one Internet site, [badjocks.com](#), is devoted to damning photos of team hazings. Duke administrators are developing a code of conduct this summer for all its athletic teams.

The group-think of sports has stirred concern about a renegade culture on campus. In their report on the Duke administration’s handling of the rape charges, William G. Bowen, an author of “Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values,” and Julius L. Chambers, former chancellor of North Carolina Central University, warn of “mission creep” and “the widening of an already evident academic-athletic divide.”

Kathleen Smith, Duke’s faculty athletics representative, conducts exit interviews with student athletes. She sees no fix to the tug of war between coaches and professors but says it is critical for the two sides to understand the demands made on athletes. “What we have seen in recent years is less flexibility on the athletic side,” she says.

It should be no surprise, then, that athlete scholars report trouble managing time and stress, says

Gregory Wilson, chairman of the department of exercise and sport science at the University of Evansville in Indiana. “It is more athletically and academically demanding than high school, but we are expecting the same results, the same high-level performance from them.”

Some turn to binge drinking, Mr. Wilson says, “for coping, for blowing off steam.”

A 2005 survey of 300 athletes at Boise State University in Idaho revealed that half had eating disorders. (The football team refused to participate.)

“A lot of time they turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms like drinking or restricting food intake because it makes them feel they have control over their lives,” says Mary Pritchard, an assistant professor of psychology at Boise State. Athletes are told “when to get up, when to go to bed, when to work out and what they will do at their workout.” Some students end up retiring from their sport.

ELLEN CORNBROOKS, who teaches anatomy and physiology at the University of Vermont, is one of those professors tugging the other end of the rope. Her course is demanding: in addition to three lectures and a three-hour lab a week, students need two more lab visits a week “to commit the stuff to memory,” she says.

“A lot of these kids were A students in high school, and college is a whole different ballgame for them in terms of being able to keep up with their work and play a Division I sport,” she says. “You feel really bad when there are kids who in every class are sitting in the second row, who are just burned out and can’t do better than a C, because you know they are smarter than that and they want more from themselves.”

About 5 percent of her students are athletes. She tries to give them some slack when they’re fresh off a road trip: she doesn’t expect them to be in class or to take a test unless they’ve been back on campus for eight hours, and she adjusts her office hours. Other professors are not so willing, and even Ms. Cornbrooks has her limits. To athletes who just don’t show up, “I am just that scary mean person,” she says.

For one of Ms. Cornbrooks’s students, Sara Toczykowski, a right fielder on the softball team, demanding science classes for a nursing degree square off against a sport that “you have to play year round to be competitive.” She is often dog tired.

“You are always trying to run from here to there, and you never think you’ll get anything done, and the stress weighs on you,” she says. Ms. Toczykowski loves softball and she loves nursing.

The problem is, she says, they “are less compatible than people think they are.”

Laura Pappano is co-author with Eileen McDonagh of “Playing With the Boys: Separate Is Not Equal in Sports,” to be published next year by Oxford.