



# Willamette Alumni in Sports: A Different Way to Go Pro

By Ben Peterson

**What makes someone a perfect candidate for a job in athletics? A love of competition? Being a superfan since childhood? Maybe it's a little of both, but one thing is clear — Willamette is a perfect jumpstart for alumni who want to shine in a sports-related career. In this issue of Willamette, we catch up with four alumni bringing their Bearcat best for teams near and far.**

## **Joining a Winning Culture**

In June, San Antonio Spurs players floated past the city's iconic River Walk on barges covered in silver and black streamers. Some 100,000 fans stood on the banks to cheer the team's NBA championship win. There was Coach Gregg Popovich and all-time great forward Tim Duncan, both holding up five fingers to signify the number of titles they've won together. There was Mayor Julián Castro, gleefully gripping the Larry O'Brien championship trophy

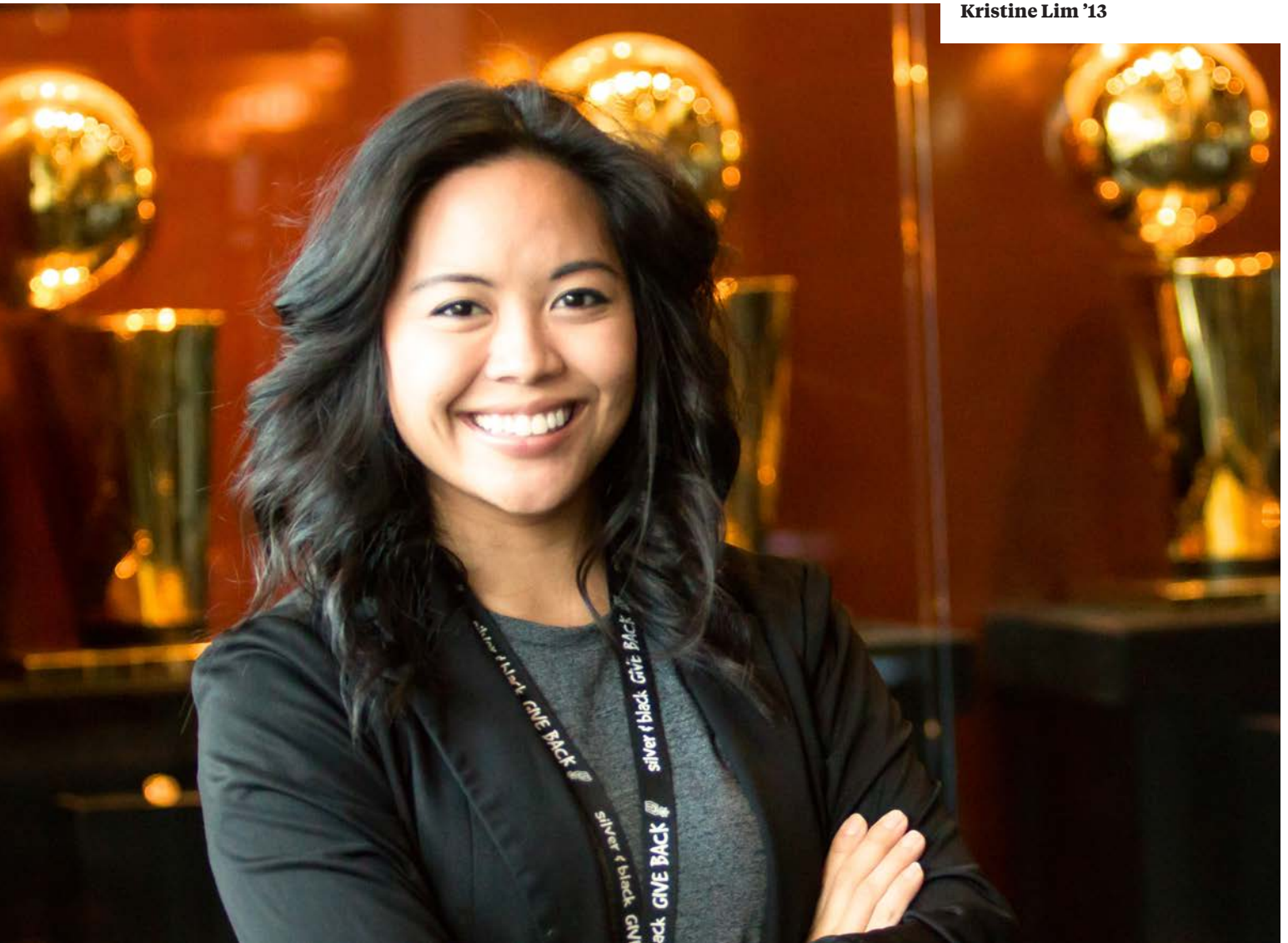
and waving to his delighted constituents. And there was Kristine Lim '13, standing in the middle of it all, wondering how she got so lucky.

"I feel so spoiled," confesses Lim, a community responsibility coordinator for the Spurs. Lim scored a job with one of the most respected franchises in professional sports just months after graduating with a bachelor's degree in kinesiology and exercise science. While she was a sports fan growing up, she had very different goals when she arrived on campus as a freshman.

"I started off thinking I would be an international studies major and then move on to international law," she says. "I wanted to work with underprivileged people around the world. Along the way, I surprised myself by becoming very interested in exercise science and thought I would go into physical therapy."

The turning point for Lim came during her senior year at Willamette. She had seen a commercial for the NBA Cares program, a global community outreach initiative that addresses important social issues such as education, youth and family development, and health and wellness. A light bulb went on for her. What if she could combine her love of athletics with her passion for helping people?

Motivated by her new direction, she attempted to contact community relations departments for teams in different sports. What she received in response was, well, not much. After all, competition is stiff for roles in those organizations, and Lim had no experience working in professional sports. Undeterred, she applied for different positions online, and was surprised to receive a call back from the Spurs. She interviewed well, was hired as a community responsibility intern, and then was hired full time for her current position.



Lim's primary role is planning and executing the Team Up Challenge, one of the initiatives of the Spurs' Silver and Black Give Back program. Designed to enrich and empower youth in the community, the Team Up Challenge implements service learning programs with area schools.

Lim credits her education at Willamette for preparing her to excel professionally. "I learned how to prioritize and how to write," she says. "I learned critical thinking skills and how to work on my own and as part of a team."

During her time with the Spurs, she's discovered just how much she enjoys working with the community, and has gained real-life perspective on the Willamette motto. "I'm so grateful that I went to Willamette because I learned how to be a global citizen, to give back," she says. "'Not unto ourselves alone are we born' — I think Willamette really believes in that. It was encouraging to learn that lesson as a student, and then see it every day in my work."

### **The Magical Season**

For almost three decades, the Kansas City Royals found themselves wistfully watching other teams compete in the World Series. In the 1980s, the Royals boasted a powerhouse squad, led by Cy Young winner Bret Saberhagen and Hall of Famer George Brett. Since then...*bupkis*. Zilch. Not even a playoff appearance since winning the title in 1985. That is, until 2014.

Grabbing a wild card spot, the Royals knocked off the Oakland A's in a one-game playoff, a 12-inning thriller that lasted nearly five hours. Next, they swept the top-seeded Los Angeles Angels in a best-of-five division series. On a roll, they dominated the next round as well, defeating the Baltimore Orioles in the American League championship series and securing their spot in the World Series. There they fell, but just barely, to the San Francisco Giants, in a spectacular Game 7. The Royals were the biggest story of the 2014 season, and it would take a strong, focused effort from the team to share the news throughout the year. Good thing Colby Curry MBA'05 was on the job.

Curry grew up in rural Illinois, rooting for the big league teams closest to him — the Royals to the west and the St. Louis Cardinals to the south. As an 8-year-old, he even created several editions of a magazine with sports statistics of his favorite players. He knew he wanted a career in sports, so he diligently worked his way up through positions at different organizations, including time as a marketing assistant in the Willamette athletics department. "I had the opportunity to work in marketing and sports information," says Curry of his role with Willamette sports. "The athletics staff was always accessible and receptive if I had questions or ideas."

His first step into professional sports came with the Portland Trail Blazers in 2004, where he landed a communications internship. "I was working one or two days a week in Portland while taking a full load of MBA classes in Salem, so I learned a lot about

time management,” he says. “Sometimes I’d take Amtrak to and from Portland and walk across the Broadway Bridge to the arena. That allowed me to study on the way, and it was a fun commute.”

Also in 2004, Curry began volunteering with the Oregon Sports Authority. He helped with the formation and development of the Sports Advisory Council, a group of young professionals collaborating to educate area youth through sports. “It was a great way to meet people and learn about Oregon,” he says.

He landed a job with one of his childhood favorites, the Royals, in 2006, serving as a marketing assistant for nine months before moving into his current post in media relations. “I met people with the Royals through an informational interview,” he recalls. “It felt like a good fit for me, a family atmosphere like Willamette.”

That family atmosphere in Salem played a big part in Curry choosing Willamette’s Atkinson Graduate School of Management to pursue his MBA. “The other schools I visited, I just felt like a number,” he says. “At Willamette, it was more of a personal

connection. That meant a lot, since I had just driven 2,000 miles, by myself, into the unknown. I enjoyed studying with the people I met at Willamette and spending time with them outside of class.”

The skills and habits he developed during his time at Willamette continue to serve him well today. “Group projects were a major component of the MBA program, and that has helped me work across departments and organizations in my profession,” he says. “We were always working on multiple projects, so we needed to be organized and focused. That prepared me for the long hours of a baseball season. Sometimes, we have 10-game homestands where I’m working 12 to 14 hours a day.”

During those long hours, this lifelong fan got a close-up look at one of the most memorable seasons in Royals history. In 2014, the Royals finished with a runner standing 90 feet from tying Game 7 of the World Series. Like all Royals supporters, Curry can’t wait to see where they finish in 2015. “There’s a buzz around town that the Royals can continue what they’ve started for years to come,” he says.

**The business of sports is booming. According to a 2014 research report by CareerBuilder and Economic Modeling Specialists, sports-related industries have seen an increase in total jobs by 12.6 percent since 2010, and average earnings (\$78,455) outpaced the national average (\$57,947).**

Colby Curry MBA’05



## Soccer City, USA

There's no question Portland loves the Blazers. But when it comes to identifying the most intense fan base in the city, it's surely the group that supports Major League Soccer's Portland Timbers. Since 2011, when the Timbers officially became part of MLS, the team has sold out all home matches, and the number of fans on the waiting list for season tickets tops 10,000. In the past year, one of Willamette's own joined the Rose City party as human resources director.

"The Timbers needed a full-time person to focus on human resources as the organization continued to grow," says Nancy M. Garcia '08 MBA'10, who previously held HR and marketing positions with Edelman, Tuality Healthcare and the Hispanic Metropolitan Chamber. "There are not that many opportunities to work with sports teams, especially here in Portland. It was an opportunity to use everything I learned from my MBA to create a human resources department from scratch."

Garcia grew up watching soccer, but she was much more focused on the NFL and NBA, cheering for the 49ers and Blazers. The chance to join the Timbers held special appeal, however. "What really drove me to go after this job is the understanding that soccer is the one world sport that can unite any community," she says. "It brings together people of different nationalities and socioeconomic backgrounds. It's very exciting to be part of a team that's changing the culture around soccer in the U.S."

She picked a great time to jump in. As a relatively young MLS team, the Timbers have ample opportunities to shape the future of the organization. "It's like a startup company in some ways," says Garcia. "The team leadership has that entrepreneurial mindset. The Timbers are reflective of the Portland community — scrappy, innovative and creative."

Another bit of good timing was starting her new job just as Portland was set to host the 2014 MLS All-Star Game, which pitted the league's best players against German superpower Bayern Munich. "I got to meet most of the U.S. national soccer team and a handful of players who won the World Cup," she says. "That was, by far, the best experience to date."

Garcia feels she chose a great school for her undergraduate degree (bachelor's in Spanish and Latin American Studies) and MBA (with a focus on human resource management). "I frequently find myself using what I learned in the MBA program," she says. "Willamette is such a strong liberal arts school. I use my Spanish all the time working with our players and employees. I learned the rules of soccer as an intramural referee. And I worked in the Office of Multicultural Affairs, which meant working with many different clubs, student associations and people across campus, along with good event planning experience."

## The Athlete Turned Mentor

Nik Lubisich '01, fell in love with sports at a young age, and he wasn't picky about what game he played. "I can remember sitting in school just dying for class to get out, so I could run out the door for recess," he says. "Kickball, wiffle ball, basketball, football — it didn't matter. I loved competing."

That competitive nature led him to Willamette, where he earned a bachelor's degree in business economics while starring on the baseball field. His success as a pitcher earned him a shot at his dream of playing professionally, and he signed a contract with the Chicago White Sox. Some tough luck led to a sudden change in plans.

"My professional career came to an abrupt halt due to shoulder surgeries in my pitching arm," he says. "I remember thinking about what I wanted to do as I completed my therapy for my injuries, knowing that my pitching days were over. It was important to me

**The professional sports economic outlook remains robust. A recent PricewaterhouseCoopers report projects that revenue for North American teams from tickets, merchandise, media rights and sponsorships will exceed \$70 billion in 2018, up from just over \$60 billion in 2014.**

to work in sports, but I wanted to find a way to help people, coach children and use my love of business and management."

He found himself guided by a passage in Malcolm Gladwell's "Outliers": "...autonomy, complexity, and a connection between effort and reward are, most people will agree, the three qualities that work has to have if it is to be satisfying." Lubisich decided to start Northwest Sports Management Group, a sports agency focused squarely on the region he knew best. An indoor training center (8th Street Sports) and a baseball academy (Northwest Futures) were part of the vision as well, helping Lubisich and his colleagues develop a strong baseball presence for professionals and amateurs in the Northwest.

"At my core, I love coaching and working with children," says Lubisich. "The academy and the facility allow me a venue and an arena to develop and forge relationships with families, where a few may some day turn into clients within the agency."

Lubisich felt empowered by his Willamette education, with one class standing out in his memory: business law with Professor J. David Thurber. "That was a wonderful class that taught me how to look at scenarios with a creative mind, read contracts and realize just how important it is to pay attention to detail," he says. "It was an intense course with an emphasis on critical thinking, organization and time management — all core concepts I use on a daily basis."

As his agency continues to grow, Lubisich maintains an endlessly renewing enthusiasm for what's coming next. "Each day is an opportunity to have an impact in someone's life, whether that's an 8-year-old who walks into my facility for the first time with his mom or dad, or a Major League client needing my services to support his career. The spectrum between those opportunities is enormous, and I enjoy cultivating the path between them." ▣

