

Breaking Barriers: Inside Hobart Athletic Culture

By Brayton Slusser

There is a certain stigma that surrounds athletes, especially in college, which works as a double-edged sword; the title of being a collegiate athlete instantly grants an individual significant social power, yet when this power is misused it often results in dire consequences. The athletes of Hobart and William Smith are no exception when it comes to carrying this responsibility, as students of a small liberal arts college they are ultimately tasked with the challenge of efficiently balancing their social life, in addition to athletics and academics, in order to best represent the school as a whole. In sitting down with former Statesman football coach, Mike Cragg, he identified this balance and its resulting success as “The Hobart and William Smith Way”, emphasizing the importance of building an athletic culture that supports any, and every aspect of college life.

I have been a lifelong resident of Geneva, New York for almost twenty-one years and according to my fellow students that still classifies me as a “townie”, despite my enrollment status. Yet, the combination of these two factors also means that my overall perspective of HWS’s culture is constantly changing and evolving. I was first immersed within Hobart’s collegiate sports at a very young age, and it did not take long to recognize the social power that these athletes carry. When I first began playing lacrosse, the Hobart lacrosse team had a very close connection with the YMCA Youth Lacrosse program, and actually offered me my first few on-campus stays through their summer training camp. This bond was the result of fortuitous connections between the Geneva and Hobart lacrosse communities, especially because of Alex Love, a Geneva High School graduate, who was Hobart’s all-star player at the time. The youth

teams were especially fortunate, however, because one of the lead coaches was the neighbor of Hobart's, now former head coach, T.W. Johnson, a man who was more than happy to flaunt his players for my team's enjoyment. To us eleven and twelve-year-olds, these athletes were simply the pinnacle of coolness; I remember my personal idol was Reid Rozello, a player who'd been Hobart's star defenseman from 2010-2012 and had sparked my love for the defensive unit.

Now a Hobart junior, I of course chuckle at these memories, especially because of how naive an eleven-year-old can be in thinking that athletes are set up for life the moment they step onto a college field. Most of the guys we idolized, Rozello included, now have professional day jobs and have left the sport entirely, while a few like Alex Love, heavily relied on lacrosse throughout their time at Hobart and William Smith, and briefly played professionally. That said, with maturity it becomes easier to recognize the various paths of life and success that one can take, and being enrolled as a student has helped me see the benefits of succeeding "The Hobart way", in addition the pride that such success brings with it.

The current head coach for the Statesmen football team, Kevin DeWall, stated "Here at Hobart [and William Smith] we truly pride ourselves on being great student-athletes", and identified that the responsibilities for student-athletes are vital to individual development during the transitional period of college. Being a small liberal arts campus, Hobart and William Smith is very unlikely to be selected as a direct route to professional sports, and therefore it is far more academically centered in regard to its larger culture, especially when compared to larger state schools such as Ohio State or LSU. Even so, college athletes still hold an advantage in regard to social power, particularly if said athlete is male and participating in a popular collegiate sport such as football or lacrosse.

While colleges do have general athletic standards, guidelines, and tolerance policies, coaches tend to enforce their own rules pertaining to those elements. Team-based sports at Hobart and William Smith are especially intriguing due to the contrasts in team policies, tolerance, and ethics, as some drastically vary in comparison to others, while still sharing some similarities. Coach DeWall expressed that there should be a sort of correlation between academic performance and athletic performance.

“I love recruiting young men who are just motivated to do the best they can do, in everything that they can do. So how they handle a Tuesday afternoon class and a Wednesday morning workout shouldn’t be different [...] We truly try to raise the bar and make sure they are doing their absolute best in everything!”

While academic standards tend to be held similarly for all college athletes and sports teams, social standards tend to vary, sometimes rather dramatically. For instance, the William Smith Soccer team does conduct mandatory drug testing, while the Hobart team does not, indicating the presence of variances in drug testing policies, and therefore highlighting a difference in social standards. Coaches tend to vary on tolerance policies due to personal beliefs and values, and that is especially evident at Hobart and William Smith. The year after T.W. Johnson left, Greg Raymond took his place as the lacrosse team’s head coach, a formidable athlete who has zero tolerance for partying and excessive drinking during the season. Coaching elements, such as these, are beneficial in teaching and preaching an athletic culture, as it reinforces player discipline while lacrosse is in season, and directly conforms with Coach Cragg’s idea of succeeding in the “HWS way” because correlates with an individual’s reliability. This policy is only in full effect during the Spring, however, and students have reported

exclusive parties being held by the Lacrosse House during this semester, where most of the time, women and players are the only individuals allowed entry.

Students using their higher status on campus as a method of corralling and coercing women is an extreme abuse and overextension of the social power they granted. Colleges everywhere, Hobart and William Smith included, have seen this abuse of power taken to extremes, prompting changes in policy. While this exploitive behavior is far from exclusive to the likes of student-athletes, it is still an ever-present risk to the female population of a campus. In particular, the “Red Zone”, as it has been called, is especially risky for first-year girls because it marks the period from day one of classes until Thanksgiving break, where sexual harrasment is more frequent. This is due to the major transitionary period for first years, as they work to find new friends and cliques on campus, typically involving much experimentation. In numerous cases, popular male upperclassmen take advantage of this time period, using it as a means to easily persuade an individual into sexual activity. Generally, when this occurs, substances like alcohol are also being consumed, making these people even more impressionable and persuasive. Moreover, unless the drinks are unopened cans or bottles, there is also possible threat of beverages being laced with drugs such as MDMA (Ecstasy or Molly) and Rohypnol, also known as “the date rape drug”. Even as a small liberal arts campus, Hobart and William Smith is no stranger to such instances, with most occurring because individuals abuse the social power that they are given.

Partying based on athletic pride is a given, no matter what you go to college, and it is an essential aspect of college life, allowing students from smaller classes to mingle with the larger population, and without the confines of a classroom. Due to its size, many Hobart and William Smith classes are small, meaning that the social element of a student’s time campus is just as

essential as the academic side and that ultimately comes back to Coach Cragg's overall statement of "establishing a culture".

"When you start building that [culture] you have to preach to your players about being at class every day, sitting in the front row, putting two feet on the floor, taking their hat off, and being on time. Pay attention, take notes, go up and introduce yourself to the professor [...] If your bad in the classroom and your lazy, typically your going to be lazy on the field too"

That is ultimately the aspect that the Hobart and William Smith community prides itself on the most; the capability to effectively balance the social, academic, and athletic elements of a liberal arts campus. The college has had its fair share of darker moments and policy failures, but the pride and current functionality within the campus culture are especially intriguing for someone who's been an observer for most of their life. As a "townie" who is now present at these intellectual lectures, bombastic parties, and raging athletic events, it is easy to see how the stigma of a stereotypical college athlete can be ignored, especially once you've been fully assimilated into the campus culture.