Q & A WITH SAMANTHA MONDA

Samantha Monda, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of sport psychology at Robert Morris University. A former NCAA Division III swimmer, she earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Carnegie Mellon University and master’s and doctoral degrees in sport and exercise psychology from West Virginia University.

Q: HOW DID SWIMMING CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A STUDENT AT CARNegie MELLon?
Swimming set me apart from other students. It gave me some skills I wouldn’t have otherwise had. When other students were sleeping in, I was working out before going to class. I learned a lot about time management.

Leadership played a large role in college sports for me. Swimming taught me how to work in a group because you are always trying to figure out how to manage your team. It’s equivalent to a work environment in the real world. How do you get along with your boss? How do you co-exist with co-workers who might be different from you? It really prepared me for the real world.

I learned to manage myself efficiently. I knew how to handle stress. A lot of people struggled with how to manage success and failure, how to be criticized or how to take constructive feedback. As a college athlete you spend a lot of time learning from feedback and using it to make yourself better.

Q: WHAT SEPARATES SUCCESSFUL STUDENT ATHLETES FROM THOSE WHO ARE LESS SUCCESSFUL?

The first thing I would say is understanding what their goals are: having an understanding of what they want to accomplish, athletically and academically.

One of the things that makes a successful athlete in college is that ability to develop some academic self-efficacy, some confidence for the classroom. Successful student athletes have some confidence in their ability to not only be successful in sports but to be successful in the classroom.

In my research, the successful athletes understood that there is sometimes not a reward right away. So academically they were willing to work hard even though it was tough because there was some sort of reward down the line. They were able to say, ‘It’s tough right now, and it’s a challenge, but it’s worth it for that degree.’

The unsuccessful athletes didn’t necessarily have that drive. They were more motivated to do their schoolwork because they wanted to stay eligible for their sport. Both groups encountered challenges and they made mistakes. But one of the differences was when the successful athletes encountered a mistake or a challenge, they were willing to figure out, ‘What can I do to adapt my strategy? Who can I talk to for help?’

What do I need to do to make it better?’ The other group ended up depending on others and not taking responsibility for their own learning.

In the fall I had a conversation with a prominent local journalist, who questioned whether it was appropriate for Robert Morris University to so aggressively promote our sports teams, given the scandals that have swirled around some of the nation’s biggest collegiate sports programs – from child sex abuse allegations to recruiting violations and illicit payments to athletes and their parents.

I was disappointed though not surprised by the question. He was not the first person to tar all NCAA Division I programs with the same broad brush, as though there is something inherently corrupting about college sports. Putting the horrific accusations of sexual abuse in a separate category, much of the criticism of Division I sports has been well-intentioned, aimed at ensuring that colleges and universities don’t exploit their student-athletes. Some of it, though, is rooted in gross stereotypes that suggest the very term “student-athlete” is an oxymoron.

That is certainly not our experience at RMU. Division I sports have played a critical role in our evolution as a university, creating excitement for Robert Morris among students and alumni, raising our visibility to the public, contributing to student life, and helping to build a complete campus experience. This isn’t just talk, as the profiles on the following pages and at RMU.EDU/PRESIDENTSINSIDER demonstrate.

Our athletes’ achievements don’t end on the court or on the field. They are immersed in the complete Robert Morris campus community, and do not occupy some rarefied space apart from other students.

Our student-athletes succeed because of their commitment to their sport, not in spite of it. As RMU sport psychologist Samantha Monda tells us on the final page of this issue, her experience as a college swimmer at one of the country’s most academically demanding universities contributed to her success in the classroom – building discipline, teamwork, and leadership skills that have shaped her as a university professor.

At RMU, athletics is an important aspect of our Student Engagement Program, which recognizes that what students learn outside the classroom – through community service, campus organizations, professional experiences, and sports, to name a few – is nearly as important as what goes on inside it. That’s why I’m proud as well of our robust club sports program, which offers 21 teams. Many of those athletes are as dedicated to their sport, and reap many of the same benefits, as the members our 23 Division I teams.

All our athletes want to compete at the highest level. Our women’s ice hockey team recently won its first College Hockey America tournament title, beating nine-time defending champion Mercyhurst. The men’s team advanced to the Atlantic Hockey Association quarterfinals. Our men’s basketball team made its fourth consecutive appearance in the Northeast Conference final and was invited to participate in the COLLEGEINSIDER.COM tournament, and the women’s basketball team advanced to the NEC semifinals.

Their success comes despite having fewer resources than nearly all of their competitors. Your support helps to close that gap. I am grateful, and I hope that you will continue your generosity at RMU through your continued membership in the RMU President’s Council. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Gregory G. Dell’Omo, Ph.D.
President’s INSIDER

STUDENT PROFILES

ANDY TOOLE, HEAD COACH OF THE RMU MEN’S BASKETBALL TEAM, CALLS HIM “PITBULL” BECAUSE OF HIS TENACIOUS PLAY ON THE COURT, BUT TO HIS TEAMMATES, VELTON JONES IS MUCH MORE THAN THAT – HE’S THE HEART AND SOUL OF THE TEAM.

Jones, a redshirt junior from Philadelphia, is the starting guard for the Colonials. In the 2011-2012 campaign, he led the team in scoring and established a new RMU single-season record for free throws.

“I try to push the players and do everything the right way, set a good example,” says Jones, a hospitality and tourism management major. “Leadership is something that has always come natural to me. My mother always told me to never be a follower, always try to lead.”

Jones takes part in RMU’s Mooncrest After School Program—a mentoring program for low-income children at an impoverished Moon Township neighborhood. The program, a collaboration with Big Brothers Big sisters of Greater Pittsburgh and Mooncrest Neighborhood Center and Pittsburgh at the Mooncrest Neighborhood Center and the special education program.”

“W hen we first started [the program],” says Jones, “it was like, do we really have to do this? But now I love it. The entire team enjoys it. You can just put a smile on a kid’s face by helping them and playing with them. It’s an awesome experience.”

A FEW DAYS BEFORE THE 2012 COLLEGE HOCKEY AMERICA TITLE MATCH AGAINST THE MERCYHURST LAKERS, ROBERT MORRIS WOMEN’S ICE HOCKEY CENTER BRIANNA DELANEY HAD ALREADY ESTABLISHED A MEMORABLE CAREER. SHE WAS TIED FOR THE RMU RECORDS FOR GOALS SCORED AND GAME-WINNING GOALS AND LED IN BOTH CAREER ASSISTS AND POINTS.

Delaney said she was proud of her first career win against the Lakers, which came a month earlier. The Lakers repeatedly swept the Colonials in prior years and took two wins against the Colonials in the 2011-12 season. The late-season victory against the longtime rivals meant more to the team than just a win.

“It was a game full of blocked shots – really gritty,” Delaney says. “It may not have been the nicest game we won, but a lot of the fans were happy to see the upset.” The Lakers were favored again in the title match, but Delaney would go on to score the game-winning goal in the final minute of the second period. Adding to her career total, she now stands alone with the RMU’s goals and career goals scored and career game-winning goals.

But not all of her time is spent on the ice. Delaney made dean’s list the past six semesters and will begin the RMU master’s program in special education next year.

She also volunteers for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Pittsburgh at the Mooncrest Neighborhood Center and spends time working with the Steel City Icebergs, a special-needs hockey program for children.

Delaney began helping the Icebergs during her sophomore year with other members of the women’s hockey team, but said she decided to continue on her own when she realized how much she enjoyed working with special needs children.

“W hen we first started [the program],” says Jones, “it was like, do we really have to do this? But now I love it. The entire team enjoys it. You can just put a smile on a kid’s face by helping them and playing with them. It’s an awesome experience.”

BRIANNA DELANEY YEAR: SENIOR POSITION: GUARD HOMETOWN: STITTSVILLE, ONTARIO MAJOR: ELEMENTARY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION NOMINATED FOR HOCKEY HUMANITARIAN AWARD 2012

NOLAN NEARHOOF YEAR: JUNIOR POSITION: BIOLOGY HOMETOWN: MARS, PENNSYLVANIA SPECIAL POSITION: DEFENSIVE END

FIRST RMU STUDENT TO WIN NEC SCHOLAR ATHLETE OF THE YEAR ON MULTIPLE OCCASIONS: 2010 & 2011

THE 2010 ROBERT MORRIS UNIVERSITY FOOTBALL SEASON WAS A TOUGH ONE TO TOP FOR NOLAN NEARHOOF, THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, NEARHOOF, A DEFENSIVE END, LED THE TEAM IN SACKS (5.5) AND QUARTERBACK HURRIES (6). The Colonials may have felt Nearhoof’s defensive contributions the most when they took the Northeast Conference Championship for the first time in 10 years and became the first ever NEC team to play a Division I Football Championship Subdivision playoff game.

Being such a pivotal member of a unit that lead the conference in scoring defense, rushing defense, and total defense attracted some national attention. Nearhoof became the third player in the program’s history to be named to the ESPN Academic All-American Second Team. He was also honored as a Capital One Academic All-American Second Team – an award he would repeat the following season.

The biology major maintains a 3.84 cumulative GPA and uses his passion for football to motivate himself academically. “You put in a little extra time each week to beat the other guys on the field,” Nearhoof says. “Staying on top of your classes is the same way.”

During his junior year, Nearhoof led the team in tackles for loss (12.5) and again in sacks (7.5). He sits atop RMU’s list of career tackles with 137.

Nearhoof’s accomplishments go beyond both the playing field and the classroom, too. Recently he started working with about 30 other RMU student-athletes to organize visits to Children’s Hospital, to clean up local highways, and to think of other ways to assist the community.

While at RMU, Nearhoof has spent time decorating and delivering gifts to the Holy Family Institute in Emmworth for Christmas, as well as volunteering at the Special Olympics. He regularly works with the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee to stay involved in special events, activities and community service.