

Push and pull

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Junior basketball player Kolby Morgan, junior bowler Michelle Ng and senior volleyball player Sarah Strasner say that the sacrifices they make as student-athletes are ultimately worth it for the love of their sports. (Photos by Paula Burch-Celentano)

It's a hot, sticky Monday morning in late August. Senior volleyball player Sarah Strasner rolls over in bed to silence the alarm set on her iPhone: 5:20 a.m. Today is the first day of her final year at Tulane, and though classes have barely begun, Strasner already has the first tournament of the season under her belt. Most days begin with a slap of the clock, but she can't snooze too long: Workouts start in 20 minutes, and coach Jim Barnes doesn't handle tardiness well.

The schedule for any student-athlete can be tough to manage at best, grueling and disheartening at worst. Not many college students see 5 a.m. from this angle: Some are crawling into bed as Strasner's alarm is going off.

"You need a lot of perseverance and joy, because if you're not happy doing it, you can't do it," Strasner said. "Time management and your work ethic have to be very good. You always have to be giving 100 percent every day for both school and sports. It's so competitive."

In the 2015–16 academic year, over 120 women donned the olive and blue to represent Tulane University on the NCAA scene, participating in nine varsity sports from August to June. These student-athletes brought home a slew of individual titles, breaking both personal and school records along the way and representing Tulane in an exemplary manner.

Track and field stars Lilla McMillan and Jasmine Blocker, who graduated from Tulane in May 2016, recently competed in trials for the Rio de Janeiro Olympics. The women of Tulane swimming and diving wrapped up their season with a second-place finish at the American Athletic Conference Championships, the program's highest showing since 2005. Basketball also went out in style, advancing to the third round of WNIT play, while Tulane women's golf came within strokes of their fourth consecutive trip to NCAA Nationals. The women of Tulane athletics are a force to be reckoned with.

Women student-athletes possess a unique competitive drive to strive for excellence in all that they do. They are highly motivated to succeed as athletes—and in the classroom. And they form strong relationships with their teammates and coaches, having fun and forging memories along the way.

TIME MANAGEMENT

Fast-forward a few hours (and a few reps in the weight room), and the time is 8:50 a.m.

Junior bowler Michelle Ng is running up the stairs to the cafeteria, Bruff Commons, to grab a banana and a quick bowl of cereal before she starts her semester with a 9 a.m. business class lecture. Her hair is wet; she has finished morning workouts. She'll have two more classes to attend, giving her enough time to grab lunch before afternoon practice starts at 3 p.m. The bowling team's season is quickly approaching, and Ng's coach, Hayley Veitch, wants everyone to be prepared.

“It was difficult for me initially. The competition durations and the number of practices per week are different compared to back home in Singapore,” Ng said. “Time management is the most difficult thing.”

Junior basketball standout Kolby Morgan doesn’t have a heavy practice this afternoon. (Her season doesn’t begin until November.) But she’s in the gym shooting baskets anyway, training alongside her brother and men’s basketball star, Malik Morgan.

Last March, Kolby Morgan reached 1,002 career points, becoming the first player in Tulane history to cross over the 1,000-point plateau in her first two seasons. This year, she’s looking to add to that total, with a goal of making her second trip to the NCAA Tournament—all while doing well in public health courses for her major. Her plans are to attend pharmacy school after she finishes with basketball.

Postseason runs like Morgan’s trips to the NCAA Tournament and the WNIT do wonders to strengthen the bonds between teammates.

Most women student-athletes agree that the highlight of their time at Tulane has been the friendships they’ve formed.

“We hang out a lot and do almost everything together,” Morgan said of her teammates. “They’re always there to support you and know how to pick you up if you need help with anything, on or off the court. We also enjoy going to other teams’ games, like volleyball and baseball. All the student-athletes talk a lot, whether it be in the cafeteria or going to and from class.”

CLASS WORK

It’s after dinnertime now, and Strasner is heading to her night class on the academic quad, quite a hike from her apartment in the Aron Residences, where she lives with her volleyball teammates. She has finished a three-hour practice and some rehab for a persistent shoulder injury, and it’s time to shift her focus from volleyball to academics. Keeping a balance between their sport and their studies is an ongoing struggle for these student-athletes, especially when the team is in season and constantly on the road.

For Strasner, a dual-sport athlete who plays both indoor and beach volleyball, the grind never stops. There is no offseason.

“It’s hard scheduling classes and missing so much school,” Strasner said. “I had to learn how to study on the road and how to teach myself, since I miss almost every Friday.”

At the start of the school year, Morgan isn’t in the middle of these struggles quite yet. But once basketball season is in full swing, she will have to balance the demands of home and road games with her commitment to her studies. Morgan said that she thrives on the touch-and-go pace of the season’s demands.

“I like being on the road, but you end up with a lot of catching up to do,” Morgan said, echoing the concerns of her volleyball pal Strasner. “But to be honest, I think it’s easier for me when we have games because it’s a stress reliever. All this hard work and studying, now I get to play it off and have fun.”

Even in the summertime, when most college students are vacationing at the beach or taking internships in their respective fields, the hard work doesn’t stop. Volleyball and women’s basketball players are scattered across the quiet campus in the hottest Louisiana months, taking summer courses and getting in extra workouts during the offseason. The slow time on campus brings them closer together before the season starts.

“We got to go home for about a month, which is nice. But summer conditioning is hard, especially for the incoming freshmen,” Strasner said. “As a senior, it’s my job to encourage the new girls, because I know all the struggles when they’re going to hit the wall and get homesick. But we realize that there’s more growth during these times, especially as a team.”

Spending so much time in New Orleans can be difficult for a lot of these student-athletes, with so many hailing from out of state. But their teammates step up and provide support for them to make it through difficult times. That’s especially important for student-athletes like Ng, whose family lives on the other side of the globe.

“It was hard in the beginning,” Ng said. “I Skyped my family almost every day for the first semester. But it gets better once you adapt to the new culture, and my team feels like my family away from home, so it is a lot better now.”

The upperclass women student-athletes inspire their younger counterparts. “For other women who are trying to get where we are, it’s an inspiration,” said Morgan.

“We made it, so you can make it, too, if you put in the hard work. Other than that, it’s trying to get to what you want in life in the future. Whatever you’re working towards, you have to work hard to get there. We learn that through athletics.”

WORTH IT

It’s 11 p.m., and Morgan, Ng and Strasner are about to hit the sack. While Morgan doesn’t have workouts until 8 a.m. the next morning, a luxury not afforded to her friends on other teams, she knows how important it is to get a good night’s sleep before another day at the office.

Later this week, the girls will have an off day spent catching up with friends, schoolwork and Netflix before getting back to the athletics toil. They may even venture off campus to sample some of the food and culture that New Orleans has to offer. The journey may be difficult, but it isn’t without its rewards, and they wouldn’t trade their experiences at Tulane.

“Playing two sports and being on two teams throughout college, I never saw myself doing that,” Strasner said. “It’s been stressful but worth it. I love it. It’s going to be weird saying goodbye when I graduate in May, but it’s been a good run.”

Kaitlin Maheu graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from the School of Liberal Arts in May 2016.

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