

Stop Mocking the Gym Majors

Once the Butt of Jokes, College Athletes Who Study Kinesiology Are Landing Plum Jobs

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The Wall Street Journal/Perform Better - Todd Durkin was a quarterback at William & Mary.

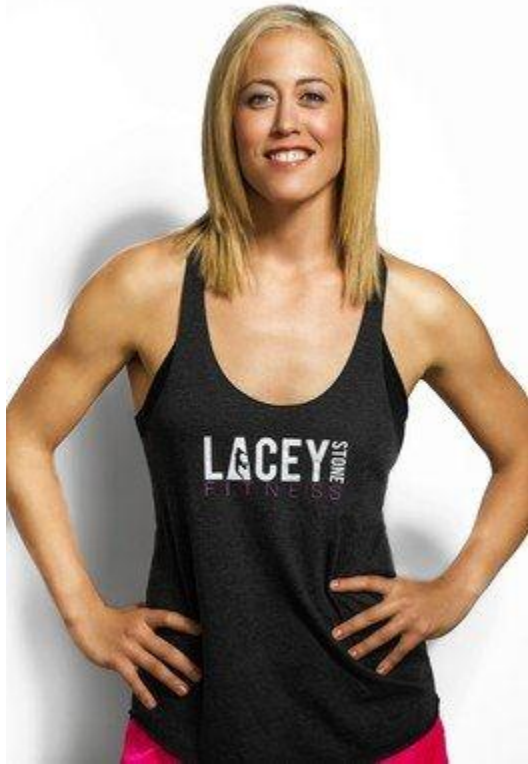
While playing quarterback for William & Mary College, Todd Durkin obtained a degree in health and physical education. In other words, he studied gym.

Don't laugh. That much-maligned gym degree is one of the hottest sheepskins on campus today, and Durkin helps to illustrate why. After the fizzling of his lifelong dream to play pro football, Durkin used his phys-ed degree to fashion a career in fitness training—a practice that now includes a Pro Bowl-worthy list of NFL clients: Drew Brees, LaDainian Tomlinson and Aaron Rodgers, among others.

"Todd is a great motivator and having played ball he understands exactly what it is you're training to do," said the veteran NFL tight end Justin Peelle.

The college sports athlete who studies exercise has long been the butt of jokes and the target for critics who lament the fact that most athletic scholarships are wasted by people who are more interested in making the pros than getting a respectable education.

Lacey Stone played basketball for the University of Maine. (Tracy Toler-Phillips) But increasingly that view underestimates the commercial and academic value of exercise studies. As the population skews older—and in many cases fatter—there's a growing demand for fitness trainers, physical therapists, pre-med students and scholars who study the science of obesity, movement and performance. As a result, few majors on college campuses are growing faster than kinesiology, as the science of exercise is known.



In this new world, the jocks are no longer at odds with nerds. They are the nerds. In Auburn University's fast-growing kinesiology department, 18 faculty members are former athletes, according to department head Mary Rudisill, a former swimmer.

Former college track star Matthew Miller, who calls himself the second-fastest faculty member in Auburn's kinesiology department, runs a performance and "psychophysiology" lab that seeks to "uncover neurobiological mechanisms underlying psychomotor performance phenomena frequently reported in the sport and exercise psychology literature," according to the lab's website.

At the University of Michigan School of Kinesiology, freshman applications rose 30% last year, and for the last five years student athletes have represented about 20% of the school's population—a percentage more than five times greater than the ratio of student athletes to the student body at large.

Not that respect is coming as fast as opportunity. For Dr. Miller, choosing to pursue a doctorate in kinesiology required turning down an offer to pursue a Ph.D. in political science, a decision certain relatives of his didn't understand. "They said, 'You're turning down a political science Ph.D. program to become a gym teacher?'" he recalls. "There's a lot of ignorance."

Of course, becoming a gym teacher has always been an honorable option. But for kinesiology majors these days, a potentially better-paying and higher-visibility choice is fitness training, a profession so popular that lawyers, dentists and English teachers are ditching those careers to become drill instructors at the gym.

As the number of personal trainers has nearly doubled in the last decade, the largest contingent may have come from college sports. A recent survey by San Diego-based IDEA Health & Fitness, a world-wide association of 65,000 trainers and other health professionals, found that 23.5% of its fitness-training members were former college athletes.

Their effectiveness as trainers may reflect years of absorbing the motivational and inspirational qualities of college coaches. No female trainer in America is hotter just now than Lacey Stone, a former University of Maine basketball player who charges \$175 an hour for individual sessions. Her specialty, however, is a boot-camp workout in which she divides participants into competitive teams, each seeking to best the other at drills taken straight from college practice.

"We do bear crawls, push-ups, sprints, stuff that reminds me of college practice, then just when you feel pushed as far as you can go she heaps on the praise, like the perfect coach," says Bobby Sabelhaus, a Hollywood film producer and former University of Florida quarterback.

Stone uses her athletic prowess as a marketing tool. "Wouldn't you want your trainer to be the kid who got picked first on the playground?" says Stone, 32.

The prevalence of former college athletes in fitness training is apparent at Gabriele Fitness and Performance, a fitness club in Berkeley Heights, N.J.

While owner Vince Gabriele played football at Temple University, his staff of personal trainers includes two other former college football players, a former college soccer player and a former college track star. "College ball teaches you to learn from failure and to stay positive when it is hard, and those are lessons you can pass on to your clients," said Gabriele.

Like real estate agents, fitness trainers can earn a little or a lot, and a former career in competitive athletics can make the difference. "I make as much today as I made when I left the NFL 10 years ago," said David Thompson, a Dallas fitness trainer who was a running back for the NFL's St. Louis Rams and before that Oklahoma State University.

Also capitalizing on his NFL experience is Anthony Trucks, a retired linebacker who now runs Trucks Training in Brentwood, Calif. In the view of Trucks, clients ought to be no more impressed with his professional experiences than with the calculus and anatomy courses he aced at the University of Oregon.

"I'm not a dumb jock," says Trucks. "I studied kinesiology, and as much as anything that's why I have the ability to help other people."