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MEET THE ELITE

Local student-athletes ring up the scoreboard and report card

Ryan Killion of Providence Academy

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BY BOBBY HART
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High school is a platform for self-discovery and a jumpstart to a future goal. Creating the spark that ignites one's future is exciting, but finding and developing the tools to do so is no easy task. Approaching their senior year, these five student-athletes already sketched the blueprint to success on and off the field and in and outside of the classroom. Now they just have to ignite the flame and discover what lies ahead.

THE ELITE

*A HANDFUL OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETES
KNOW AND SHOW WHAT IT TAKES TO SUCCEED.*

[Ryan Killion]

ExCEling → at Everything

Well-rounded is an adjective Providence Academy high school principal Kevin Ferdinandt refuses to throw around. "I think it's overused," he says. But in the case of Providence junior Ryan Killion, the administrator admits it's a rare fit. "He's got priorities in all different kinds of arenas, and he balances them well," says Ferdinandt, who along with other administrators nominated Killion for the ExCEL Award, which stands for Excellence in Community, Education and Leadership.

The nomination form was no match for Killion, who had multiple honors and accomplishments to boast in categories such as athletic activities, fine arts activities, general contributions to the school and volunteer community service. So although it wasn't a huge surprise to Ferdinandt when Killion was chosen as one of 32 juniors from across the state to win the 2011 award, it still took time to sink in for the former class president. "It was huge for me," Killion says. "I'm not really the type of person to gloat about the things I've done, but when I won, I felt pretty proud of what I've accomplished over the last couple years."

Those accomplishments are many. The honors student played varsity football, was all-conference in three different track events as a sophomore and two as a junior, was first chair trombone in band, and went to state as a member of the debate team—which might have the most influence on Killion's future. "That's a big reason why I want to go into law," says the upcoming senior co-captain of the varsity debate team.

But Killion doesn't fit the negative image some people associate with lawyers. Not with a resume that includes more than 1,000 volunteer hours "I think he's a shining example," Ferdinandt says, "of what represents our school in the best sense of it."





[Phifer Nicholson]

An Unanimous Leader ←

When it came to electing a team captain for the 2011-12 season, each of the 50 members of the Providence Academy/Heritage Christian Academy Lions football team had a vote. All but one of those votes was for upcoming senior offensive lineman Phifer Nicholson. "He didn't vote for himself," says Lions coach Nate Harrington.

That says a lot for a team coming off back-to-back 8-0 seasons, and even more for Nicholson. "He's very easy to follow," Harrington adds. "He's a natural leader."

At 6-foot-1, 200 pounds, Phifer fits the description of an athlete, and he acts the part. Known as a talented two-way player (he also played linebacker) and a student of the game, he was all-conference as a sophomore and all-conference honorable mention and all-section as a junior. He also played varsity basketball for two years (he will captain that team this winter) and was a thrower for the track team for one.

But his scholarly ways are what makes him special. "The balance in him in terms of being an outstanding student and an athlete is what stands out," says Heritage athletic director Chris Laird.

Phifer, who has a 3.9 GPA, was class president as a freshman, a representative as a sophomore, was chosen to represent his school at a math contest at St. Cloud State University twice, and was also picked to participate with a select group of area students in a business ethics workshop run by the local Rotary Club.

Phifer is aiming to play college football; it's just a matter of where. No matter where he decides to go, he'll pack his work ethic. "I feel like I'd rather be scolded for making a mistake instead of being told 'you weren't working hard enough,'" Phifer says. "That's the way I go about playing sports and anything in general."

Rachel Cooper

A Humble Hero →

Rachel Cooper speaks softly, but she carries a big stick—a couple of them, actually. The Osseo incoming senior's two wands of choice are a lacrosse stick and a hockey stick, and in most cases, she lets both do the talking for her.

As a junior, Cooper led the North Metro Stars hockey team with 17 points and led the Osseo/Park Center Mustangs lacrosse team with 52 goals. She's played varsity in both sports since ninth grade, but is leaning towards pursuing her "passion" of lacrosse in college. Mustangs coach Martha Trumble believes Cooper, a three-time all-conference player, definitely has the skills to play at the next level. Trumble believes it so deeply, she encouraged her junior captain to try out for the Minnesota Lakers select summer team, which gave her the opportunity to travel all over the world to play in top college recruiting tournaments.

"She is just a natural," says Trumble of Cooper. "She is just unbelievable. She will play any position she is asked to play and do anything she is asked to do ... She just has an uncanny ability to get open, get the ball and put the ball in the net."

Cooper is also a standout performer in the classroom, where she maintained a 3.7 GPA as a junior while taking AP and HP classes. "School is very, very important to me," says Cooper, who is on the Junior Class Committee and a member of National Honor Society.

If history serves as evidence, Cooper will continue treating goalies to sleepless nights as a senior. But it won't be her tooting her own horn. "One thing about Rachel is she doesn't realize how good she is," Trumble says. "She's just maybe starting to see it. She is modest."



[Mikayla Bailey]

Beyond the Numbers →

Stats make the sports world turn. Especially in high school, when athletes are auditioning to prolong their career to the college level, the truth is in the numbers. Osseo senior and basketball star Mikayla Bailey breaks the mold. Individual stats are flying so low on her radar, she couldn't even recite her numbers from this past winter. "You'd have to ask my coach," Bailey says. "I don't really keep track."

Bailey, who averaged a little less than 10 points per game this year as a junior, wasn't the Orioles' leading scorer or rebounder. In fact,

she wasn't even in the top two in either category. Yet it was Bailey who caught the eye of Minnesota Gophers coach Pam Borton, who offered her a scholarship this past summer. How? "Defense," Osseo coach Joey Waters says, "is definitely her biggest asset. In any game since her freshman year, she could guard the best player. It doesn't matter if it's a forward or guard, she takes on that challenge."

As team captain, Bailey led the Orioles to a stunning 23-3 regular-season record and a conference title last winter, while also leading

the team in two unselfish stats—assists (3) and steals (2) per game. "I'll dive on the floor for any loose ball," says Bailey, a varsity player since ninth grade. "I just love the game so much, I'll do anything."

But anything doesn't include sacrificing her school work. Bailey, who battled through a challenging class schedule that included AP English and HP Chemistry, finished her junior year with a 3.4 GPA. "[Academics] always come first," Bailey says. "I'm always challenging myself because I want to prepare myself for college."





[Dylan Steman]

Packing a Punch with Touch ←

It's one thing to be a three-sport athlete in today's prep uni-sports landscape monopolized by elite traveling teams and year-round tournaments. But the true rarity of Dylan Steman lies within the unique set of abilities he uses to excel in his sports of choice.

He packs the hard-hitting punch to be a standout cornerback on the Maple Grove Crimson football team. He has the touch and vision to be a varsity tennis player. And he combines a little of each to be one of the finest hockey players in the state. "You don't see that combination," says Crimson hockey coach Gary Stefano. "When you play three sports nowadays, it's awfully tough, and you have to be a great student and have a lot of discipline."

Steman, who had a 3.99 GPA while earning all-conference and St. Paul Pioneer Press Honorable Mention All-State in hockey as a junior, fits the bill. He enjoys and excels in math and science, and is considering engineering as a possible area of focus in college. But no matter what path of study he chooses, it's very likely Steman will be playing Division I college hockey somewhere.

Steman led the Crimson hockey team in scoring (16 goals, 33 assists for 49 points) during a magical 2011 season that included an 18-game unbeaten streak and the program's first conference title. Not surprisingly, he was voted team captain in his upcoming senior season. "He works awfully hard," Stefano says, "and when the guys see that, it's kind of a takeoff for the whole team." //

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