

When Lucy Knudsen '23 arrived on campus for cross-country preseason in mid-August, Macalester felt more like a ghost town than a university campus. Only a handful of fellow athletes populated the three freshmen dorm halls. Each morning, she brushed her teeth in an empty Turck bathroom and returned each night to an empty hall.

But that ghost town effect turned out to be a blessing. In those few weeks before the rest of the class of 2023 arrived, Knudsen made close friendships with her fellow first-year runners. And when it came time for orientation, when the rest of Macalester's class of 2023 moved in, she was grateful to navigate the first days of school with an already tight group of friends.

"It was nice to go into college ... with a group of people to fall back on," she said.

Joey Stern '23 and Ryan Davies '23 feel similarly. They both came to campus weeks before other students for soccer preseason, and quickly bonded with their teammates.

"The first night we were here, we all went to Jimmy John's," Davies said. "I have a picture of Joey. He's pretty excited."

"I love Jimmy Johns!" Stern added.

This team building begins even before the school year begins, according to men's head soccer coach Gregg Olson. Most of the first-year soccer players commit to Macalester early decision in December of their senior year of high school.

"Before [the first-year soccer players] even get to campus, we introduce them to the guys on the team and set up mentors," Olson said.

For non-athlete students though, the fall teams' closeness can bring about a perceived divide between athletes and non-athletes.

Lola Brown '23 does not play a sport. She chose Macalester for its academic rigor and international focus. Brown has struggled to find a strong community through campus orgs, and sometimes longs for a tight-knit friend group like the athletes.

"Those people are the ones hanging out together, like all the swimmer girls or all the baseball boys," she said. "Which I think is great for them, it's just kind of a bummer for me."

She notes that finding strong community through student orgs is challenging because of the lack of consistent attendance.

"With sports it's almost obligatory, like you're gonna be going to practice every week," Brown said. "Whereas with clubs it's more like 'well maybe I'll see you at the meeting in 2 weeks, but I might not go and you might not go.'"

Director of Student Leadership and Engagement Laurie Adamson coordinates first-year orientation every fall. She notes that orientation staff aims to acclimate student-athletes to the college as a whole, not just their teams.

"We talk to the [student-athletes'] parents and we say, 'please, parents who come to drop off their students early, please encourage them to expand their networks to really push outside of just their team,'" Adamson said.

Staff also structure orientation to facilitate a sense of community belonging to the entire campus.

“We try to create a schedule that has small group interactions led by orientation leaders, has large group tradition-based things like the bagpipers and the President speaking, that gives that sense of ‘I’m a part of something bigger,’” Adamson said.

Still, many athletes’ closest friends come from their team: this is the case for Davies, Stern and Knudsen. By spending time together every day during for practices, games and team-building events, close bonds among teammates are practically inevitable.

According to Davies and Stern, the divide isn’t just perpetuated by the teammates themselves. It’s also due to negative stereotypes of athletes on campus.

“I’ve had conversations with people and I hadn’t told them I was on the soccer team,” Davies said. “And they start going off and making jokes about how student athletes are always this and that and then I’d be like ‘oh, I’m actually on the soccer team,’ and the tone quickly changes.”

Winter and spring athletes don’t have that pre-orientation bonding time – they arrive on campus at the same time as non-athletes. For some of those teammates, the divide is much less tangible.

Mason Bosley ’23 is on the Macalester track team, which practices in the winter and spring. Most of his close friends are not on his team.

“Track really didn’t play any sort of role in my orientation,” he said. “I met some really good friends in orientation, but none of them through sports.”

Athletes stress that they are always open to making new friends on or off their teams. In fact, some athletes believe that friendships outside of their team are crucial to a holistic experience at Macalester.

When Stern visited campus as a prospective student, he met a senior soccer player for lunch who introduced him to his friends both on the soccer team and off.

“That was really important for me to see at Macalester,” Stern said.

Because Macalester’s sports are Division III, student-athletes are not receiving scholarships for their athletic talent. So to draw in student-athletes to their teams, Macalester needs to offer more than athletics.

“This is obviously a fantastic school and I was able to get in, so I didn’t see any reason not to come here,” Bosley said. “Track was just an added thing that I wanted to on top of that.”

Davies feels the same.

“If anyone on the team wanted to be focused only on sports, they wouldn’t be here.”

Info box: 2019 orientation

- Macalester’s 2019 orientation occurred from August 29 to September 2, lasting 5 days.
- Orientation is made up of both mandatory and non-mandatory events for new students.
- The mandatory events included a series of events called “This Matters at Mac,” which are presentations from college staff that cover topics like sustainability, sexual assault on campus and civic engagement.
- The college hosts a “zero-waste dinner” for all new students on move-in day every year, featuring a meal served entirely with either reusable or compostable dishware.
- Optional events include Yoga on Old Main lawn and mini golf.

Lindsay Weber  
First year story  
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