



# The team behind the athlete

## Anne Louise Williams on supporting a high-performing student-athlete

Conor Ferguson (aged 16) is an elite swimmer from Northern Ireland who trains over 20 hours a week. His proudest achievement to date is being the 100m Backstroke Champion at the 2015 Commonwealth Youth Games in Samoa: “When I stood on the first place podium position getting my medal presented to me followed by my national anthem, it was a proud moment in my career”.

When an athlete achieves the pinnacle in their chosen sport, whether it be winning a title, making the tour, becoming a world champion or achieving an Olympic medal, they tend to reflect on their journey and the supporters who assisted them along the way. For a student-athlete, the entourage consists of many individuals who work together to support and develop that person. Whilst focused on different aspects of the athlete’s life and career, the parents, coaches and school all share a passion to guide, manage and support the student-athlete to achieve their goal in the shorter term and to prepare them for a future as a successful and balanced individual.

Conor’s entourage includes his parents, coach Alan Bircher and Ellesmere College, UK where he is a boarding student. Vicky Pritt-Roberts, Deputy Head Academic of Ellesmere College, an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School, commented: “We pride ourselves on valuing the individual which is something lots of schools claim. But to really demonstrate that, you need to be willing to adapt and be flexible to enable the individual to pursue their goals, and have a good education. Helping athletes achieve both is an example of our mission in practice.”

Being an essential ‘cog’ in Conor’s entourage, Ellesmere College ensures that he is able to balance his training regime and school work. Pritt-Roberts added: “By being aware of the demands that elite training puts on a young person, and by drawing on their commitment to their training and the self-discipline that generates, the school liaises with coaches at the start to ensure that their schedule is designed to dovetail their academic and training commitments. For example, they have supervised homework sessions earlier in the day



for certain groups of elite athletes so they can attend their training sessions later. The school values opportunities to do other activities, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award, so where an athlete is keen to do this, they alter the programme to accommodate their commitments and still be able to access the elements of this award. By doing this, the school finds its athletes can have a range of experiences and helps them to grow in confidence outside of their sport."

Recognised as an Athlete Friendly Education Centre (AFEC), Ellesmere is an accredited 'athlete-friendly' school by the World Academy of Sport. Pritt-Roberts commented: "We strive to create an environment where athletes can thrive in academic, personal, and sporting terms. Having AFEC accreditation is the quality mark that sends that message out so they can see we are serious about this." As a World Academy of Sport, AFEC-accredited school Ellesmere College is provided with an international accreditation recognised by many International Sport Federations as well as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC).

In Conor's opinion "The key with balancing academic and sport commitments is planning and being organised. For example, if I have a competition coming up and in that same week an exam for a subject or an assignment to hand in, I'll make sure that I do enough work in advance so I am prepared for that exam or complete the assignment a week earlier. This therefore avoids any type of stress from the academic side of my life meaning I can compete without any unwanted distractions". For coach Alan Bircher there is one clear characteristic of an athlete who has a more balanced life, especially when it comes to education and sport. "It's really simple, they are consistent. Consistently swimming at a high level and being able to have sufficient rest between sessions and schooling gives them the best chance to achieve."

The benefits to Conor in attending a school like Ellesmere College which actively supports athletes in maintaining a balance between sport and academic commitments is very clear to Conor's parents. They make the following observations about particular benefits experienced by their son:

**Like-minded People:** "Being with like-minded people means they communicate in a similar fashion, they are more likely to get the best out of each other and they are more likely to want to live in a less negative influencing environment that may affect their performance – alcohol, drugs, partying etc."

**Athlete Family:** "This family works together, learns to live together and be there for each other. (It has been a joy to observe from a distance). This experience joins the dots in a protected environment between childhood and adulthood. Conor's development is clear to see when he returns home."

**Wisdom and Shared Experience:** "The school has the experience and the technical expertise in dealing with athletes and their challenges; the unseen pastoral care has been exceptional. Conor's attitude towards many situations has improved and his understanding and knowledge is mainly due to the expertise of the staff and students he is surrounded by."

**World Class Environment:** "We consider the coaching World Class, the personal and academic environment World Class, and the school is working on the facilities to become World Class. Many of the athletes are World Class at a junior level – Ellesmere College is the best stepping stone for them to become WORLD CLASS!"

Communication between members of the entourage is a key ingredient of the success for Conor as both a student and an athlete. As coach Alan Bircher commented, "As a coach, I'm an open book and any information required from the school, parents and Conor is free to access. I have regular meetings with the school to make sure students are up to date with the academic side, and with regards to the swimming, we have communication with parents and athletes, and make sure the line is always open. As is often the case for athletes, there are many individuals who support Conor in making him the most successful and most balanced athlete he can be. Ellesmere College, his parents and his coach will certainly all be mentioned in any upcoming acceptance speech he is likely to make in the future.

The World Academy of Sport (WAOs), with support and guidance from its International Advisory Board, the International Baccalaureate and many of the International Sport Federations, has put in place a framework for schools to become accredited as 'athlete-friendly'. Schools like Ellesmere College are accredited for delivering excellent support services and providing flexible learning pathways to enable student-athletes to balance their sporting and educational commitments.

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