Striking A Balance: The Stanford Athlete-Student

Introduction

Sunday, October 21 8:39 pm, Email from Tara Kirk to Nancy Daniels:
I have to be at the pool at about 12:45 because warm-ups are at 1. I have to think if I’m going to need some time to myself to focus a little before the meet (I have been sick for about two months and am facing a couple girls who I would be a little worried about if I were healthy and so am now more than a little concerned about). TK

Monday, October 22 8:06 pm, Email from Tara Kirk to Nancy Daniels:
Ok, I have decided on my plan. I think that I am going to leave my class about 11:40 and go home to get something to eat. I will probably try to start napping at about 12. The meet is going to be a pretty intense one. TK

Tuesday, October 23 10:12 pm, Email from Tara Kirk to Nancy Daniels:
Ok, so the plan has changed. Here is my schedule for the day. We have a shortened morning practice from 7-8 (it is usually 6-8:30) then I am going home to have breakfast. Then I have HumBio from 9-11. Then I am going to drop my paper off at my other class and go to the team premeet meal at the sports cafe. I will probably go from there back home and take a nap. … The meet is going to be a dogfight. There is no race that we can easily win. The focus has gotten a little tighter. .. TK

Wednesday, October 24 3:13 pm, Avery Aquatics Center
It’s a warm, almost-hot day at the Avery Aquatics Center, Stanford University’s splendid monument to swimming. The sun casts long shadows across the pool deck as Tara Kirk takes her place on the lane 4 starting block and prepares to dive. She crouches just above the water, head low and body tense. When the blast sounds, all eight competitors propel themselves from the blocks in unison. Tara leads in the first of eight breaststroke laps, but a swimmer from the University of Georgia threatens to take the lead.

Tara takes long, enunciated strokes, her head and shoulders coming high out of the water before diving again. At the halfway point, the Georgia swimmer has overtaken the lead. By the time they touch the far side of the pool for her final turn, the two swimmers are neck-and-neck. The cheers reverberate off the metal bleachers, as the two rivals sprint for the finish. The winning time:
2:13:90, an NCAA qualifying time. Their fingers had touched the wall at the exact same hundredth of a second.

**Background**

This is a report on recent research about student-athletes at major American universities. This research, conducted during October and November of 2001, focused on one world-class swimmer at Stanford University. Tara Kirk, 19, had been a swimmer and gymnast in her hometown of Bremerton, Wash. After some “serious recruiting” and a November admissions letter, Tara decided to attend Stanford to swim under the tutelage of Olympic coach Richard Quick. She entered in the class of 2004, more than half of which had earned straight-As in high school, according to school statistics.

Stanford has a record of outstanding academics and powerhouse athletics that is unparalleled among most major universities. Academically, 90 percent of Stanford students represent the top 10 percent of their high school classes. About 75 percent earned 1400-1600 on their SAT’s and 76 percent had a high school GPA between 3.8 and 4.0. Seventy-nine Stanford students have been named Rhodes scholars.

The school’s athletics statistics are also staggering: Stanford fields teams in 33 Division I varsity sports, which have won a combined 88 national team titles. Stanford athletes – one in 10 undergraduates is a varsity athlete – won 21 individual championships during the 1992-93 season, the second most in history. Stanford has now won at least one NCAA team championship for 24 straight years. Thirty-eight of Stanford’s athletes and coaches participated in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona while 49 competed in Atlanta at the 1996 Games — by far the most of any university in the nation, and 34 participated in the 2000 Games in Sydney.

Our research team set out with the following questions: What does it mean to be an athlete at a top-academic school like Stanford? How do student/athletes reconcile their two lives? Are they separate? What kind of tradeoffs do they have to make for each to satisfy the goals of the other?

**Methods**

After determining the main questions, we strategize on how to locate a prime subject. We felt that a woman would be easier for us, two women, to get to know quickly within our limited time frame. So, we searched the Stanford Daily newspapers and gostanford.com, the athletic department’s website to identify headliners, the star athletes. Regarding age, we decided that we would not pursue a freshman, because her experience would still be quite new and not yet

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1 This is the name given to varsity athletes by Stanford, and many NCAA schools.
accustomed to the University or the team at all. We also chose to disregard any seniors, because those people would have “one foot out the door” and possibly be more involved with their decision-making after Stanford.

We formulated a list of six potential candidates, with three athletes as our top choices based on high-profile sport, national ranking, potential for professional or Olympic level competition and grade. We wrote an email letter informally introducing ourselves and our project, which we sent to our top three candidates. Tara Kirk responded first, within twelve hours that she would be happy to participate.

We conducted one, one-hour observation of Tara during a swim meet between Stanford and top-ranked University of Georgia approximately ten days after our solicitation. We did not speak to her at this event, but watched her actions from the stands at the meet. We met her a week later for the first of two hour-long interviews at her apartment. The interviews were about fifty minutes long and two weeks apart.

**Findings**

Our findings are at best intuitive inferences. Because of the limit of our time and research, they are based on meager evidence. We used all of the senses at our disposal — including that sixth sense — to evaluate what we heard and saw during our interviews and observation. Having interviewed only our main subject, we had to rely on patterns of speech, behavior, and answers to about twenty-five questions as the bulk of our data. We performed a little bit of web research but were, in most cases unable to sufficiently triangulate our data to be able to assert any solid findings. Our findings and conclusions, therefore, are tentative, and we hope they are read and interpreted in that light.

**You have a job to do**

To discover that the life of a high-level NCAA caliber athlete is demanding and structured is expected. However, for the women’s swim team at Stanford, the commitment runs surprisingly broad and deep. Despite established NCAA limits on the amount of training hours per week, the Stanford swim team stretches those parameters. Their regimen consists of a whopping twenty-eight hours, nine sessions of optional weekly training. The training sessions include activities other than swimming such weight training and spinning (stationery bicycles). Saturday morning workouts are of four-hour duration. The word optional really isn’t. Because of the fierce sense of responsibility, drive and obligation that Tara and her teammates have to their coach, the team and to their own optimal performances: a missed practice is really not a good idea.
Other than the training regimen, Tara and her teammates' responsibilities extend to other aspects of the swim team. There is travel time to out of town swim meets that usually involve three to four days away at a time. Every fall and winter the swimmers take part in the recruitment effort for future teammates. The demands cut into their studies and social life:

ND: What are other tradeoffs, if there are any, that you make between swimming and academics?
TK: Um, well, definitely there are some times when it like conflicts, when I like have to study, or like these past couple weekends, like we've had recruits and they're here from Friday to Saturday and like they take up a lot of your time. You know, you have to deal with them a lot; I mean, it's the whole team, but you can't just depend on someone else to do that job. You know, like you should be there all the time.
KB: Is that required?
TK: It's not required, it's just something that some people like to feel is, they should do.
KB: To make the team better?
TK: Yeah! To make the team better. I feel like it's my responsibility.

Recruiting weekends are numerous. So, although in November there was a period of four weeks where no swim meets were scheduled, Tara's weekends were filled with team demands.

This is our fourth recruiting weekend straight and it's really tough because like I have midterms, I had a midterm the Monday after the 9 recruiting, er I had like a midterm the Monday after two of them. And like, I just like I should I wish that I could have been studying, but at the same time, like recruiting goes first, I'll study on Sunday. Like maybe it would be nice if I had the whole weekend to study or the whole time to read because like I'm two weeks behind on my reading now, but like you have to make that sacrifice for the team, you know.

Tara repeatedly characterized her commitment to swimming as a job. Her words and tone convey a seriousness, focus and intensity that are unusual in a nineteen year old. She explained her feelings during a swim meet as follows:

you have a job. And your first priority is getting that job done. My job is to hopefully win those breaststrokes, although I tied them so it wasn't really the same amount of points. But like, you know, I had a pretty tough job. I had to I had to make sure that I was in the right state to like get my job done. Like that's part of a team, everyone doing their job. And then there's also like the cheering and there's like encouraging everyone else and like all that stuff, which you like as soon as you're done with your job, that's your next thing.
Personal performance and racing times are of high importance. At times during the Georgia meet, Tara was observed as being solitary, having removed herself to sit alone on the ground in the breezeway to the locker room. Some other competitors were observed to be more actively interacting with the action at hand, cheering on the sidelines or speaking to the coaching staff. What does that mean in terms of her self-perception as a swimmer? Is she an individualistic Olympic contender? Or a team player? Are the roles differentiated or the same? She explained her behavior:

You know, [you] do what you came to do and then you like help the team. And I think also, being part of the team is way more than being at the meet to be part of the team sometimes I cheer before my event, like I ll be on the box and I ll be like, Go! but at the same time, like I m focusing on what I m doing. And uh, like sometimes I wonder if that s like a little bit selfish, but at the same time, you need to get your job done. So I don t know, there s definitely like, I think but I think that my idea of team is not just being together at the meet, you know it involves recruiting, it involves practice, it involves almost everything. You know, being a part of the team involves like sleeping, it involves like getting your schoolwork done, so that you can be at practice, like being a more effective member of the team. It involves like being giving to your teammates and all kinds of stuff like that. And being there for them. And not just stuff that s on the [swim] deck every week.

The commitment to swimming is both individual and collective. She speak an eloquent party line about team effort but clearly she views individual achievement as a primary requisite of being a valuable team player.

_I m being coached by a legend_

Richard Quick is clearly Tara Kirk s most influential adult on a daily basis. His reputation as coach is in the echelon of legendary. Before Stanford, he coached the University of Texas s women s swim team to national championships for several years. Since coming to Stanford twelve years ago, the women s swim team has been one of the top three ranked NCAA teams every year. His current coaching responsibilities also include the US Olympic Swim Team.

Tara s acquaintance with Coach Quick was made while she was in high school in Washington State. As she described it, when her swim times starting reaching a national caliber, she was noticed. Quick actively recruited her, especially because there was an upcoming vacuum of breaststroke talent on the Stanford team. The definitive moment in her decision to swim at Stanford probably lies in an impressive event that occurred in the spring of her senior year. She
was in Athens, Greece competing at the World Games. She received a fax from Richard Quick saying, “We need you and want you to come to Stanford, good luck, etc.” Tara was pleased and especially flattered because it was the exact same weekend as the NCAA finals, which Richard was attending away from campus. Predictably, he would have been absorbed with Stanford’s performance.

I was really nervous in coming to Stanford because like, I’m being coached by a legend. I mean you read about him in magazines. But now, he’s just Richard. He’s still really impressive, but you know the stupid little things that he does. Like he sings this silly song. He just like a wacky old man (giggle). But he’s really inspiring. When he asks me to do things, I just go!

Words like famous and inspiring are reiterated in Tara’s description of her coach. He makes the effort to have a personal relationship and connection with every one of his swimmers. His physical presence and influence is a constant in their Stanford lives.

Curiously, Tara is aware that although she believes that Richard Quick’s interest in her is sincere, she questions whether it is in proportion to her current value to him and the team.

Sometimes I wonder, like he has personal relationships with everyone on the team but he has a terrible memory. So, if he’s still coaching and I came back like five years later, I wonder if he would remember my name. He’ll remember the Tara Kirk I am now but like, I don’t know. He’s really personal, like now, but in ten years? I hope it’s not the case.

Obviously, Coach Quick’s attitude toward the balancing of swimming and academics has huge influence with the team. Tara described his philosophy during an interview:

he basically says, I mean he says that you should not drop your schoolwork for swimming. But that you need to make sacrifices on both sides. And uh, swimming is, I think from what he expects is that when you’re swimming, you’re swimming and you should give your all to it. And like if you have to take a midterm or a final during practice, like do that. But like you should be able to plan and manage your time because everyone here er like everyone who makes the team has already been a student athlete and has already been a very good student athlete, so you should be able to plan your time and manage both. Like it’s expected. It’s not something that you should do. Or like, oh I’m really happy that you managed to manage your time in a successful manner. It’s like, you need to do this and if you can’t, well there is no can’t. And if you need help, you can like go for tutors or something like that.
Tara maintained very good grades her freshman year. She currently has a 3.6 average. She has thus far, successfully balanced the dual roles. Other teammates have not been so lucky. Tara shared a recent anecdote that reflects her feelings about individuals who have trouble keeping up with the demands.

The girl, her times haven’t been as fast as she’d like them to be and she’s getting kind of stressed out. She sent a few really annoying, and panicked emails across the team list begging, please help me with my thesis! Tara was very put off that the girl sent it to the whole team. She opined somewhat disdainfully, If you want help, ask someone personally. Do it yourself. Don’t complain.

That attitude was reiterated in another commentary. She cited that at certain times in the season, everyone is sore, everyone is tired, and everyone has finals or midterms. But don’t complain. You’re not special. She emphasizes that it’s one’s own responsibility to get it all done.

She ended the story about the struggling teammates explaining that the girl consulted with the Coach. She talked to Richard. And he gave her this afternoon off. The girl can use the single afternoon to catch up with her studies! And this concession? It’s a rarity. The coach’s response reinforces his expectations: there is no can’t.

You want to say that school comes first, but it comes first within reason

Tara’s commitment to swimming extends to impacting her class choices at Stanford. She feels that she will never take more than fifteen units per quarter. She is reconciled to the possibility that she may have to attend a fifth year to complete her unit requirements but she doesn’t express this option as a negative concern.

She has yet to declare a major. Many sophomores are still undecided at this phase of their undergraduate careers. She is currently enrolled in the Human Biology core, which is a full ten units per quarter. It consists of a scientific side and a social scientific side, thus being the equivalent of two five-unit classes. Tara enjoys the Hum Bio classes and is considering it for her major, although she doesn’t express any future career goals or application of the Hum Bio curriculum. In fact, she lacks any professional career goals or personal goals outside of swimming.

Lest one be suspicious that Tara Kirk is less intelligent than the average Stanford student, her SAT admission scores certainly put that concern to rest. She scored a formidable 1450, with a 780 on the verbal component. So, while her swimming life is structured and on a path toward definite goals, Tara’s goals outside of swimming are un rushed, undefined and unplanned.
Her quarterly selection of classes is limited by the parameters of her swimming schedule. The main criterion is that classes not conflict with team practice time. She has early morning practices (for as long as two and one half hours) and afternoon practices (at three o clock). She expressed that staying awake during her three days per week, nine am classes is sometimes difficult. Also she attempts to enroll in classes that meet early in the week. If there is an out of town swim meet, the team usually travels on Thursdays through a weekend. She expressed mild irritation that most professors hold office hours from three to five pm. Every varsity athlete-, which is one in ten undergraduates- practices in the late afternoon.

She mentioned that all the cool seminars seem to be held three to five o clock as well. Does that mean that she would forego signing up for a really interesting seminar if it were held on a single weekly afternoon? Definitely. The way Tara sees it is that missing one of the nine weekly practices is, well, over ten percent and not a good thing! She clarified further that if the seminar were required for your major, you d have to work it out, but otherwise, no way.

Of course I want to choose classes that I like. But I kind of choose the classes that I like from the ones that aren t during practice. If you need a class for your major and it s during practice, then that s what you do, except that you try to make it during spring quarter because that s after NCAAs.

The NCAA championships are held in March. Last year they occurred in New York during dead week, the week before finals. Tara had to take a difficult Math exam immediately after returning from a week of intense swimming and a cross-country plane ride. She had missed ten of the thirty class meetings that quarter because of her swimming commitments. This year the NCAA s will be during finals week itself. The swim team will have to make arrangements to take their finals either before leaving town or in hotel rooms.

Some professors are more accommodating than others when dealing with athletes. Their policies and tendencies are taken seriously into account by athletes and definitely impact decisions to enroll in certain classes.

One of the things that I guess, we have to be careful about is professors who don t really like athletes. Like there s a couple of them out there who just won t go out of their way to help you out. And have those things that say like if you miss two classes, you re going to fail this class. And some of them don t bend at all. [You have to] go to the first class and check out the professor. Because you know, you re definitely going to be gone.

Tara expresses where she draws the line between her two roles in the following way:
I don’t miss much practice, missing practice is a bad idea. But if I had a midterm during practice, of course I’d skip practice. So, you want to say that school comes first, but it comes first within like reason, you know? I’m not going to put school as my first priority, but in kind of like in the general scheme of things, I need to do good in both. It just is a compromise.

If my body holds out, then I’ll keep swimming

Tara does not see her life in terms of career goals. There is swimming, and then there is uncertainty. When we ask about swimming goals, she talks excitedly about world championships, the Pacific Games and the 2004 Olympics. She describes dropping tenths of seconds for American records and earning the coveted NCAA championship ring.

Her goals come in definitive increments. Next up: To break the American records in the 100- and 200-meter breaststroke at the NCAA championship. Then, the selection meet for world championships. I know that I’ll be in Texas for NCAA’s in March and that’s pretty much as far as I’m going. The far future is 2004, and the Olympic team, and way off on the horizon, she sees the 2008 Olympic team.

But where does she see herself in 10 years? I don’t even know, Tara says. I haven’t even picked my major. I’d like to be, I don’t even know if I would go to grad school or if I would like, do something I just hope to be happy. From our conversations, it appears that Tara doesn’t think much about life after swimming. She answered several questions about her life goals by describing her swimming goals. I don’t really know what my life would be like without swimming. It’s hard to imagine because I’ve not I don’t really actually seriously consider what my life would be without swimming because it’s not gonna, I’m gonna be swimming.

But Tara is hyper-aware that her future is tied up with her physical well being. If she can get in shape, she might be able to pull off big wins at nationals and hopefully make the Olympic team. And after that? If my body holds up long enough then I’d say another four years, but I definitely beat myself up through swimming. She describes the chronic groin strains and the messed up cartilage in her chest (When I go back to do my hair, my chest will pop.) and the scar tissue in her legs.

For Tara, these injuries are not only painful, but could threaten her future. If my body holds out, then I’ll keep swimming, she explains. But last year was definitely like, last summer was such a push. Like I was training through groin strains and I was going to rehab all the time, having massages done and stuff like that just to try and maintain being healthy. Though the rehabilitation process is painful and drawn out, Tara sees it as a necessary means to an end. When she describes the physical therapist breaking up the scar tissue in her legs — I was like totally
writhing. I was like grabbing onto the shelves. It was SO painful! — we visibly wince at the description. But Tara doesn t say she would consider backing off on her intensity level in order to save her body; she sees injury and rehab as critical elements of her career. I hope I don t have to do that again. But if it makes me better, it s worth it.

I m just closer to people on the team

Tara s social life is bound tightly to her swimming life. Her friends are mostly swimmers, and she feels a responsibility to her teammates in and out of the pool. I meet people outside of swimming, but my main, like all my roommates are swimmers, she explains. A lot of people on the team, when we were choosing drawmates last year, were like, Well, like I m going to hang out with you guys a lot so I m going to draw with people from my dorm so I can hang out with them also. Which is a good idea, but I m just closer to people on the team. Tara lives with two other swimmers in an apartment in the athlete-dominated dorm Mirrilees. She says the three support each other and understand each other s unique stresses and needs.

Tara also concedes that she has to make compromises between her social life and swimming life. Certainly, she has to avoid Friday night ragers in favor of Saturday morning practice. There are a lot of sacrifices that you have to make. Like, I don t go out partying and all that much. Although, I guess you could and still do it. And I don t drink. And you have to watch, kind of what you eat, definitely not eat too many carbohydrates and sugars. It sounds pointedly different than conversations with many college underclassmen, but Tara does not sound disappointed or begrudge the sacrifices.

That same intensity spills over into her dating life. Tara described the getting-to-know-you stage of a relationship from last year. When she realized that her new boyfriend didn t understand the role of swimming in her life, I realized he was stupid. I was like, I m going to Nationals, and he was like, Well, just skip the meet and stay here with me. And I was like, that was kind of like the dawning of realization that this guy is an idiot! I was like, I m going to Nationals! Don t you understand?

But Tara is comfortable with her boring life, hanging out with friends, shopping occasionally and resting up from training. And she recognizes that her social life will often take the backseat to her schoolwork and her health. I study quite a bit, and I don t really go out all that much. When I go out it s definitely like, I m going out today, tomorrow I ll study. But that s the way it goes. She adds: I haven t actually gone out much this year, just because I ve been sick and I ve been trying to get better.

Conclusions
We’re torn. Our perspective — and gut instinct — about what we saw and heard point us toward one conclusion: Tara is an athlete-student, not a student-athlete, and the former comes at the cost of the latter. But if we look closely at our data, at what Tara actually said, we draw another conclusion entirely. So let us own up to our subjectivity. We have never been competitive athletes; we are career-minded; we are invested in our academic pursuits; we see the world from a different vantage point, one 10 to 20 years in Tara’s future.

Through our eyes, we see a young woman working to bridge the gap between her swimming life and the rest of her life, between being an adult and being a teenager. We listen as this worldly woman describes her desire to be the best in the world at what she does. And we see a na ve girl, her speech peppered with like and you know, and her Pollyanna-ish goal to just be happy.

We see a woman, perhaps emblematic of other athletes at other schools like Stanford, who rank their athletics above everything else. She, and perhaps they, makes decisions about what classes to take, and what major to choose, and who to date, and where to live based on its relationship to her sport. We see significant sacrifices, in terms of her schoolwork, health and social life based on her commitment to swimming. And our subjective eyes intuit a blind faith to the sport and to its models — her coach and teammates — that leave her later future murky and goal-less. We would be unsettled in her shoes, nervous about what would come next and worried that we had put too many eggs into a single, tenuous basket.

But Tara sees her world differently. She rarely noted the tradeoffs or sacrifices related to swimming, using those words only when we prompted her with them. For her, swimming is just another commitment in your life. Just like, Oh, I have a class then, or I have practice then. She sees swimming as equal to any other thing that forces its participants to manage their time and make commitments that lead to inevitable benefits and drawbacks.

College is about learning to manage those commitments. For Tara; it’s about learning about teamwork in the pool and learning about biology in the classroom. And, just like many other college students, she doesn’t know what her long-term future holds. She hopes it will unfold as she grows and learns and makes short-term decisions. I don’t feel like in college you re really learning about things, you re kind of like learning about life College is like more like an experience like it s learning about everything there is to learn, but not like specifically stuff you learn in classes. I feel like I learn stuff in the pool, like teamwork and like getting to know people and having all those experiences and stuff like outside of swim — er, like outside of school, where I get to travel for swimming.

More than drawing her attention from other aspects of her life, swimming helps Tara focus. I think that without swimming, I d have to have like some other motivator to like get to work, Tara says. And Stanford, it seems, has helped Tara coolly put her lofty goals into perspective.
Coming to Stanford kind of puts it into perspective. Because there are so many people who are so amazing in so many different things. Like you know I’m going for the American record, but like this person made his own film, or written his own book, or like, you know what, half those web pages over there, they’re student-made. So I think it’s like, sometimes when I step back and say, Whoa, it’s the American record, at the same time, I feel like that being at Stanford, it sets up a condition for excellence.

Tara would probably concede that the “athlete” part of her persona comes before school. And on most days, it comes before her health and wealth and social life. But the athlete-student dichotomy is one that Tara has purposefully created and carefully cultivated. She thrives in that space. There is no cost equation between the two. For Tara, they simply co-exist.