ACADEMICS AND ATHLETICS

BOLDLY RISE TOGETHER AT FRESNO STATE

by Eddie Hughes
It was one of the coldest football games ever played at Bulldog Stadium. The temperature chilled to 34 degrees by the time No. 24 Fresno State wrapped up a 24-17 win over Utah State in the inaugural Mountain West Conference championship game. Purple and black confetti sprayed through the cold, night air as thousands of Fresno State fans poured out of the stands to celebrate with the team at midfield.

But this isn’t just a sports story. It’s about more than that. It’s about the role of athletics within a major university and how tapping into the passion of the community can define the university’s future.

The Red Wave fell in love with the 2013 Fresno State football team during its 10-0 start and climb toward the top of the national rankings — the same way the community rallied around the 1998 softball team and 2008 baseball team as they each won national championships.

It has been said that Fresno State athletics are the “porch light” of the university — a shining beacon of school spirit that gets alumni, prospective students, community members and donors interested and excited about what’s happening on campus.

Through successful athletics programs, Fresno State can shed light on some of the notable academic work happening as well. This past season, Fresno State had 11 nationally or regionally televised football games.

“Each time we play on ESPN, they come back from commercials and show our vineyards, our agriculture or our water institute. Those things show people that Fresno State is a leading institution when it comes to those disciplines,” says Thomas Boeh, Fresno State’s athletics director. “In essence, it becomes a three-and-a-half-hour commercial for Fresno State.”

Fresno State football games are the only events with the potential to bring more than 41,000 community members to the same place, at the same time, dressed in their Fresno State colors and proudly representing their university — while potentially millions tune in across the nation.

First-year Fresno State President Joseph I. Castro declared that he wants academics and athletics to excel together — and early signs are encouraging.

“From my early days transitioning to the presidency, some people presented academics and athletics as an ‘either-or’ to me, and I believe that’s a false choice,” Castro says. “I know some people love one or the other more, but they are both so important to the university, community and Valley. I want academics and athletics to rise together, and I want us to invest more in both areas.”

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Derek Carr earned Academic All-America and athletic All-America honors in becoming Fresno State’s all-time leading passer.

Former Bulldogs football players donated room in the Meyers Family Sports Medicine Center

“Many practical things are learned through the hard work you must put in to be a successful college athlete. Learning how to be responsible, hard-working, show good character and deal with temporary setbacks are just some of the things athletes learn in college. Lance and I believe athletics are a very important piece of the successes of the university as a whole.”

— JEFF THIESEN

Jeff Thiesen and Lance Dueker
UNIVERSITY INTEREST FUELED BY ATHLETICS

The university can’t say for certain how much student interest in Fresno State has been driven by recent success of the athletics programs, but data show an almost 7 percent increase in freshmen applications and about 15 percent increase in graduate applications over the past year.

With a record 23,060 students enrolled at Fresno State this past fall, there’s no doubt interest in the university is growing. In a survey sent to the 3,227 first-time freshmen (another record) who were accepted, 90 percent said Fresno State was their top university choice.

Demand for admission was so strong this past fall and last year that the university had to turn away 3,000 fully eligible first-time freshmen, yet still accommodated all eligible applicants from the Valley.

“Most would agree that a rising tide raises all ships,” Boeh says. “Athletics and academics on a campus not only fit together, intercollegiate athletics is woven into the fabric of higher education in the United States. It’s very much part of the culture.”

Informal research shows the national exposure generated by athletics has also boosted the university’s attractiveness to potential faculty and staff.

“Fresno State is hot right now,” says Jamie Ferrare, managing principal of the AGB Search firm that has handled several of the university’s recent national searches for president, provost and vice president.

“People are recognizing what Fresno State is doing and part of that is the athletics program. People want to be part of a positive environment.”

Ferrare, whose firm handles 80-100 searches a year, says good candidates do their homework when applying for a position, and seeing the university in national news headlines and on television is a plus.

425+ STUDENT-ATHLETES IN NCAA SPORTS

Fresno State was featured on the front page of the Los Angeles Times on Nov. 21 with a subhead stating, “The Bulldogs of Fresno State are unbeaten and perhaps unmatched for fan pride among college teams in California.”

A full-page graphic in the Wall Street Journal this fall illustrated where all 125 major-college football programs rate on and off the field. The programs are ranked athletically (from “weakling” to “powerhouse”) and academically (from “embarrassing” to “admirable”). Fresno State was one of just 32 programs in the “admirable-powerhouse” quadrant of the chart.

Ferrare says, “When we ask, candidates say Fresno State has really good publicity of late, partly because of the football program. They say how exciting it seems to be a part of a community like that.”

A 2012 University of California, Berkeley study provides further evidence there could be a tight-knit link between athletics success and a boost in academic prestige. The study found that winning football games leads to an increase in student applications, a rise in SAT scores of incoming students, increases in alumni donations and an overall enhancement of the school’s academic reputation.

“That first entrée to campus could be at the Downing Planetarium or a science fair, but it could be at a football or basketball game, too,” Boeh says. “People look around and say, ‘Well maybe I can belong here, too. Maybe I should aspire to be a college student.’”

Castro says as a kid growing up in Hanford, he first learned about Fresno State in the 1980s while watching its powerful men’s basketball program under former coach Boyd Grant.

“The athletic programs provide an opportunity to engage for all sorts of people, young kids and families who aren’t touched by the academic part of what we do,” Castro says. “I watched the NIT championship on my grandmother’s black-and-white television. I didn’t know anything about the academics at Fresno State at that time, but I knew about these basketball players who were college students and I thought, “How great is that?””

7% INCREASE IN FRESHMEN APPLICATIONS OVER PAST YEAR

15% INCREASE IN GRADUATE APPLICATIONS OVER PAST YEAR

Perhaps nowhere is it more evident how athletics can generate interest in the university than on social media. The university’s official Facebook page has about 46,000 likes. The page predominantly shares major academic news and accomplishments at the university, but also shares sports news to help build school spirit.

It’s no surprise the biggest surge in likes this past year came between September and December — football season — with more than 4,000 new likes.

“Sports are what energizes people,” says Dr. Tamya Pierce, Fresno State’s director of social media and integrated marketing. “Every football post that we put up got huge numbers. And we saw similar results with women’s basketball and some of the other fan favorites.”

46,000+ Likes

www.facebook.com/FresnoState

47,000+ Likes

www.facebook.com/FresnoStateAthletics

SOCIAL MEDIA HYPE MACHINE

FALL 2013 UNIVERSITY ENROLLMENT

23,060 (ALL-TIME RECORD)

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENROLLMENT

600+ (ALL-TIME RECORD)

FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN

3,227 (ALL-TIME RECORD)
Though much of the recent national attention has been generated by a winning football program, Fresno State has a history of success across the board athletically. The baseball program is just five years removed from its captivating “underdogs to wonderdogs” run to win the College World Series, and the softball program won the school’s first team national title in the 1998 Women’s College World Series.

But perhaps no program on campus has made a bigger rise to prominence over the past decade than women’s basketball. The team has won its conference tournament title six of the past seven seasons and earned seven straight NCAA tournament berths.

“When we win, our fans and donors continue to grow in their support of Bulldogs athletics,” says second-year women’s basketball coach Raegan Pebley, who led Fresno State to Mountain West tournament championships in its first two years in the conference. “They are investing in student-athletes’ futures and future championships.”

So what comes first, support or winning? Boeh says it works both ways — while winning can fuel ticket sales and donations, those things are needed in order for a program to win. “We’re getting ambitious and bold with our aspirations,” Boeh says.

“We need to capitalize on the success we’ve had. In college athletics, if you look to be average you’re going to lose. Everything we do, whether we have the resources or not, every thought has to be, ‘How do we win championships?’”

Right now, part of that thought process is upgrading facilities. In addition to the recent projects in the Student-Athlete Village, Fresno State is working to complete construction of its 1,000-seat soccer/lacrosse stadium and break ground on a new two-story, 22,000-square-foot faculty and coaches office building near Bulldog Diamond.

There’s never a shortage of needs, but resources are often the biggest challenge. Fresno State’s athletics revenues of $30.7 million rank just seventh in the 11-member Mountain West (eighth if including Hawaii, a football-only member). UNLV, which tops the conference, boasts revenues more than $28 million larger than Fresno State’s. Yet, Fresno State has won back-to-back Mountain West football championships in its first two years in the conference, as well as two women’s basketball tournament titles.

“To have sustainable success, we will need to invest more,” Castro says. “It’s the same way I look at academics — to raise our academic profile, we will need to invest more.”

And with sustainable success, comes growth. The university is investigating the feasibility of reinstating the once-top 10 men’s wrestling program after it was cut in 2006 due to budget concerns. Castro has identified the men’s wrestling program and a new women’s sport as areas he’d like to see investments in from the university and private supporters.
The UC Berkeley study showed that a one-win increase at that university during a football season translated to 104 additional applications for admission and $74,000 in increased giving to athletic programs.

At a university like Fresno State, where private support is the only way to compete on a national level, the benefits of a successful sports season go a long way.

“We’re going to need more support to be able to continually play at this level and be able to maintain a sense of competitiveness,” Boeh says, “because the rest of the industry is moving very, very quickly.”

Fresno State is doing its best to keep up. In September, the university opened its new $6 million, 10,000-square-foot Meyers Family Sports Medicine Center, featuring hydrotherapy pools, rehabilitation equipment, treatment and diagnosis space and a nutrition education area. The facility will impact the physical well-being of all 425 Fresno State student-athletes and serve as a cornerstone to Fresno State’s Student-Athlete Village, designed to centralize sports medicine, academic counseling and strength and conditioning.

The project was made possible by a lead gift from Marvin Meyers, a Fresno State alumnus who established an innovative water banking project in the late 1990s and has become an educational resource for water conservation. Meyers’ involvement with the university has since extended beyond athletics, as he now serves on Castro’s recently formed Presidential Commission on the Future of Agriculture.

“He’s just as excited about how we’re going to strengthen agriculture as he is about athletics,” Castro says.

Castro says it’s increasingly common for the university’s top supporters to be involved with both academic and athletic programs.

Christopher Morse and Ken Wittwer, who own local accounting firm Morse, Wittwer, Sampson LLP, provided a major gift for the Meyers Family Sports Medicine Center and the lead gift to remodel Fresno State’s strength and conditioning center — another project that touches all student-athletes and impacts recruiting. Morse and Wittwer also support the Craig School of Business and the Fresno State Alumni Association.

“It’s a way to give back to our community in a far-reaching way — the ability to provide student-athletes with a great education and the facilities to reach their professional goals,” Morse says. “The majority of our student-athletes don’t go get a paycheck in their sport, but they get a degree and become great members of this community.”

While these major gifts have the ability to spark transformation and propel the university to new heights, there are a variety of other ways to support Fresno State. And it might be as simple as going to a game, contributing to the annual fund or joining a booster club for $50.

Dan Bushey, president of the Hoop Club and Bulldog Foundation board member, latched on to the women’s basketball program 10 years ago and used it as a way to spend quality time with his daughter, who was 6 years old at the time. “We really enjoyed the games together,” Bushey says. “She became a ball girl that season, and I started to get involved.

Fresno State has also expanded efforts to reconnect with student-athletes from years past and make sure they feel a lifetime link to their alma mater.

In February, Fresno State hosted its fifth annual National Girls and Women in Sports Day, honoring the many Fresno State female student-athletes and coaches who helped pave the way for today’s enhanced opportunities for women. The university has also arranged alumni weekends for various sports and recognized past players and teams by bringing them back to campus, such as the 1983 NIT men’s basketball champions.

Wes Lovell, a Bulldogs golfer from 1996-2001 who’s now a Valley-based home mortgage consultant, says he felt it was his responsibility to support Fresno State after graduating because the university supported him.

“I would encourage everyone to do whatever they can within their means to support Fresno State athletics and academics, whether it is financial support, attending athletic events or spreading the good word,” Lovell says. “The better Fresno State does athletically and academically, the better the Central Valley becomes.”

Donated lead gift to remodel strength and conditioning center, donated room in Meyers Family Sports Medicine Center

“We want to give back to the community and this is the way to do it. When Fresno State does well, our whole community gets a shot in the arm. There’s more Bulldogs T-shirts, more Bulldogs flags flapping on people’s cars, it’s just a sense of pride. It helps the image of Fresno State and the Central Valley,”

– CHRISTOPHER MORSE

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GROSS SALES

$250,000
In the fall 2013 semester, Fresno State student-athletes earned a cumulative 3.11 grade-point average, outperforming the general student population at the university. And during the past year, 132 Bulldogs earned Academic All-Mountain West honors.

Redshirt sophomore Charles Washington, a starting safety on the football team, says his mother and grandmother have always pushed him to do well in school and get a degree. “That would be a major thing for my family,” Washington says. “Not too many people in my family even made it to college. For me to graduate in four years, that would be something big.”

That type of parental guidance is a common theme with some of the university’s top scholar-athletes.

“I have always enjoyed learning,” says Vonnie Martin, a senior third baseman on the softball team who’s studying mechanical engineering. “My parents and grandparents enforced a good work ethic for my classes at a young age, and it stuck with me all these years.”

Coach Pebley says student-athletes receive tremendous support and in turn want to make the campus community proud. “The best way we can do that is to model what it means to be a part of Fresno State,” she says. “We need to strive for excellence in the classroom and on the floor, as well as give back to our community.”

Giving back to the community is a part of the culture of Fresno State athletics. Fresno State student-athletes volunteered 4,225 hours from July 2013 to February 2014, leading all Mountain West schools for the second straight year. Members of every team on campus often visit hospitals and schools, volunteer at the Bulldog Pantry and help sell newspapers for The Fresno Bee’s annual Kids Day benefiting Children’s Hospital Central California.

It’s part of the overall athletics approach to academics that has grabbed Castro’s attention. He believes there are methods and tools that can apply to the university’s general student population. “We’re starting our Fresno State tablet program to give all students access to technology that can help their education,” Castro says. “Student-athletes have had tablets for more than a year, as well as advising resources.”

A list of the top 50 public academic institutions in the country, with a few exceptions, mirrors the top athletics programs in the country, Boeh says — whether it’s women’s volleyball, football or another sport.

Any program on campus, from the Craig School of Business and the Jordan College of Agricultural Sciences and Technology to the track and field and volleyball programs, contributes to the “branding” of the institution.

“Prestige is prestige,” Boeh says. “When an institution stands for excellence, whether it’s academics or athletics, it’s still excellence.”

– Eddie Hughes is the Fresno State Magazine editor.