

SPORTS

In the middle of a preseason workout, seventeen-year-old freshman guard Samira Fields caught a pass and saw her opening. She went low to drive, but heard a sudden, unmistakable “pop.” The forces from her hamstrings and glutes had torn the Achilles tendon from her heel.



BY KARIN MCKIE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT BAIN

Building a Bridge

Fields had reattachment surgery and will need about seven months to fully recover. Rather than being disappointed that she won't get to compete until next season, Fields is taking her mom's advice to use the downtime to focus on classes that will help her explore a career in music producing. Because she recently completed SJSU's new Summer Bridge program, which helps student-athletes develop both brain and body, she was well prepared to deal with an unexpected challenge. “Summer Bridge helps you figure out what you want to do in addition to athletics,” she says.

Until recently, SJSU struggled with its Academic Progress Rates, the NCAA's measure of whether a school's student-athletes actually make it to graduation. Collegiate teams falling

below the NCAA's baseline score of 925 (out of 1,000) can have difficulty recruiting and can incur penalties that affect scholarships and bowl participation. In 2005, the football program's APR was just 837, but jumped to 931 by 2010. Women's volleyball coach Oscar Crespo, whose team's APR went from 966 to 995 during the same period, says that Summer Bridge not only builds campus sports teams holistically, it also helps individual freshmen, who in turn can better blend with returning athletes.

For sophomore middle linebacker Vince Buhagiar, his 2010 Summer Bridge participation helped him get on track to graduate in

three and a half or four years. “If I hadn't taken the two Summer Bridge courses, I wouldn't have been able to take my psychology major classes already,” he says. Buhagiar's

Summer Bridge experience also gave him an unexpected leg up with the football team. Because he had an extra month to train, lift weights and learn their defense, he was ready to step up as a freshman player when the Spartans suffered a number of injuries that season.

The cross-disciplinary Summer Bridge curriculum is like athletic “redshirting,” in which inexperienced college players train with the team but don't hit the field right away. The practice provides athletes a vigorous yet nurturing environment. Summer Bridge provides

**KNOWLEDGE =
CONFIDENCE =
PLAYING FAST**

K.C. Pearce, Doug Blackstill and Tyler Ervin get tips on getting ahead in class from Katie Parry, learning support specialist for football.

scholarship players with an intensive month of six academic units, practice and team building, as well as campus and city life exposure, all before their first semester, to alleviate the extra confusion of athletic matriculation. "It's a way to learn the ropes before the real deal," says volleyball middle blocker Mary Alice O'Reilly, who also participated in the program.

The idea for all this started with Spartan head football coach Mike MacIntyre, who saw it as a way to help SJSU keep pace with other Division I institutions and to better support Spartan student-athletes. "We had a successful Summer Bridge system at Duke University, and I wanted my first recruiting class, in summer 2010, to inaugurate a San José program," he says. "Instead of a brief, two-day orientation, athletes get over a month to get grounded before the whirlwind begins. It's the best way to start a college career."

Student-Athlete Success Services Director Liz Jarnigan says Summer Bridge supports the university's ultimate goal of well-rounded student-athletes who graduate on time, and are prepared for life after graduation.

In the program, students attend two classes for four hours a day over five weeks, and get a rigorous immersion in collegiate sports training, practice and team bonding. In addition, SJSU's counselor education department collaborates with Athletics to offer the students a class in personal, academic and career exploration that covers stress management, communication skills, career assessment and development, and an introduction to campus resources. Those topics helped Stephon Smith, a 6'8" freshman basketball forward who aspires to be a sports agent, decide on a communications major with a business minor.

CORNERSTONES DISCIPLINE AND CONDITIONING

ACHIEVEMENT CATEGORIES:														
	M&W CROSS COUNTRY	W BASKETBALL	M BASKETBALL	BASEBALL	FOOTBALL	M. GOLF	W GOLF	GYMNASTICS	SOFTBALL	M. SOCCER	W. SOCCER	SWIMMING & DIVING	VOLEYBALL	WATER POLO
Teams for Teams		100	1008	334	40				1160	896		256	302	542
Scholarly Success														
Community Outreach		30	100	28	32	42	208	500	350	8	66	110	102	300
Personal Enhancement		30	14	44	18	56	8	8	122	354	10	40	86	114
Professional Development				24	8			4	32	159		6	4	6
S.A.A.C. Communication		8	6	8		6	2	8	8	8	8	8	8	6
Athletic Excellence														
Above and Beyond					35				70				40	
Team Goal		100			100			100					100	
Total	38	430	1184	74	134	52	328	1892	1767	26	378	310	912	144

Volleyball's O'Reilly and basketball's Fields both found value in communications lecturer Shannon Doyle's public speaking course. O'Reilly learned that improved speaking confidence is useful both on and off the court,

for media or job interviews.

Fields always thought she was a solid public speaker, yet Doyle's class forced her to focus on the advanced skills of projecting and engaging with an audience. Her Achilles injury reinforced the importance of practicing these types of "real life" competencies. And because student

athletes face unique challenges in juggling class requirements and athletic obligations, Doyle imposes deadlines. "These students especially need to learn how to manage their time and not put off assignments until the last minute," she says.

Doyle says she was impressed with how the athletic department made sure the students practiced their speeches. Basketball point guard Ta'Rea Cunnigan appreciated this help when presenting her memorized class talks in front of her team or her tutors, a focused repetition not unlike basketball practice drills. Football Learning Specialist Katie Parry led the college transition aspects during the first week of Summer Bridge. She often met the students at their dorm and walked with them

to class to orient them to campus. She spent two hours with them each Sunday, going over reading and note-taking skills and study and test-taking strategies. She even taught them how to introduce themselves to a professor.

Perhaps most importantly, Summer Bridge allows new teammates to bond before the fall season starts. O'Reilly notes that, especially in team sports, a personal connection off the field or court is crucial. Cunnigan agrees that spending time together builds team unity. She adds that Summer Bridge's intensity also made "regular" college activities seem more manageable. Coach MacIntyre says that "if the students can handle this, they can do anything. Our Summer Bridge program builds confidence."

After Summer Bridge and at the beginning of the fall semester, Fields helped other new students get around campus, saying she felt like a "veteran" freshman. Originally from Bakersfield, football right tackle Doug Blackstill now feels comfortable in San José, and likes to hang out on Santana Row and at nearby points of interest. He notes that, after taking the Summer Bridge program, campus life is not nearly as complicated as the famous Winchester Mystery House. Instead of constructing all those disconnected rooms, maybe Mrs. Winchester should have built a bridge. ♦

The character of any team is reflected in the standards it sets for itself.