

Monday, April 28, 2008

Hawk athletes up a creek, but for a good cause

On Sunday morning when most of you were either in bed or in church or in a state of depression over the weekend almost being over, a group of about 40 student-athletes from the University of Iowa were in full work mode.

Their assignment was to clean a tributary creek near the new eastside recycling plant on Scott Boulevard.

The crew included several members of the Iowa football team -- which came in handy when it was time to lift some large, filthy branches and stumps out of the mud -- and members of the men's and women's swimming teams and the soccer team.

They were assisted by a few other volunteers, including a guy named Noah Poppelreiter, who let's just say wasn't afraid to do the dirty work or the heavy work.

Also on hand to oversee the clean-up crew was a city employee named James Protaskey, who raised more than a few eyebrows by wearing a bright red Nebraska sweatshirt.

I chuckled when Protaskey told some of the student-athletes, who were mostly Iowa football players, to pick up the pace a little bit. One of the student-athletes mumbled under his breath that it would be easier to follow orders if the person giving them wasn't wearing a Nebraska sweatshirt.

He wasn't being disobedient but rather loyal to his school because all of the student-athletes did what they were told. And while they had fun doing it, largely at each other's expense, the work ultimately got finished.

Cleaning the creek was among the many activities that took place Sunday as part of the University of Iowa's 10th annual Hawkeye Day of Caring project. The project is sponsored by the Iowa Student-Athlete Advisory Committee, and its goal is to increase the level of community service among its teams and individuals.

The student-athletes gathered at Carver-Hawkeye Arena early Sunday morning and then were broken into groups and sent to do different locations throughout the city to do volunteer work.

The media normally doesn't cover this event because it's not considered newsworthy enough.

We figure that students-athletes do stuff like this all the time, so what's the big deal?

Well, actually, that is the big deal.

By Pat Hardy

It's been well-documented that 15 members of the Iowa football team have been arrested in the past year.

But what gets overlooked are the positive things being done by UI student-athletes, including football players, on a regular basis.

Take walk-on fullback Wade Leppert, for example. He earned my vote for most outstanding volunteer among the football players in a close call over redshirt freshman linebacker Tyler Nielsen.

Leppert didn't seem to care too much about his clothes getting wet and dirty or that it was him doing most of the heavy lifting.

"Just got to get some work done, I guess," Leppert said. "We showed up at nine, they gave us a job and we had to moped over here and just get some work done."

One of the funnier moments came when Nielsen was put on the spot when asked what it meant to do volunteer work.

"Well, it's good to give back to the community," he said with a sheepish grin.

Upon hearing his answer, Nielsen's teammates erupted in laughter, apparently amused by what he said or how he said it or both.

Nielsen seemed a little embarrassed, but what he said was spot on.

Despite what you've probably read or heard lately, Iowa student-athletes, and UI students as a whole, still give a lot more to this community than they take from it. They still give fans and alums more reasons to be proud about their alma mater than embarrassed by it.

Iowa students mostly were responsible for cleaning Willow Creek over the past month.

And if you've never cleaned a creek before, it's not my idea of fun, unless you're doing it with your friends and teammates and for a good cause.

There were probably a lot of other places the student-athletes would have preferred to have been Sunday morning, most notably in bed, but they didn't let that affect what they were doing.

The student-athletes whose bodies were better-suited to pull weeds performed that task, whereas the football players helped drag large branches from the creek when they weren't poking fun at each other or commenting about the guy in the Nebraska sweatshirt.

"Today we got kind of lucky, we got a bunch of big, buff guys," Poppelreiter said. "But most of the time it's just average college students who do the work."

This was also a learning experience for the student-athletes because it's highly unlikely that any of them knew about a weed known as garlic mustard before Sunday.

"They're doing nothing but pulling garlic mustard," Protaskey said while pointing to a group of about 10 male and female student-athletes who were hunched over the ground. "It's an invasive species of weed that's been growing here in Iowa City."

By the time they were through pulling the weeds, many of the student-athletes were calling it garlic ketchup instead of by its real name. It's amazing how something as silly and as simple as a play on words can lighten up a moment and help bring people closer together.

But it's also unfortunate that so many good deeds by UI student-athletes get overlooked. So the next time you see a group of young adults cleaning a park or a creek, shout out to them "Go Hawks," because that's probably who they are.