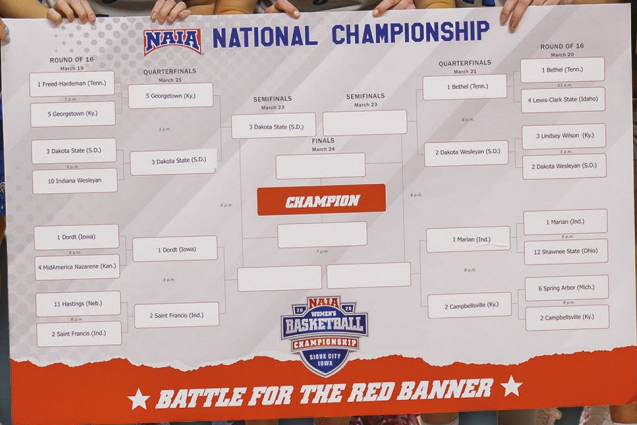


TROJANS PLAYBOOK

DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS MAGAZINE



TROJANS

DAKOTA STATE®

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR OF ATHLETICS

DEAR FANS OF DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY,

What a year it has been for Dakota State University Athletics!

From record-setting performances to unforgettable moments of Trojan pride, this past year showcased the very best of who we are and where we are headed. The energy surrounding our programs has never been higher, and it's all made possible because of your incredible support.

This year marked major progress in our continued growth. Our second year in the Brian Kern Family Stadium at the Beacom PREMIER Complex represents a game-changing step forward for our student-athletes and fans alike. Combined with enhanced training resources and impactful new partnerships, DSU is gaining momentum and strengthening its presence on both the regional and national stage.

And we're just getting started.

Our commitment to building championship-level experience both in competition and in the classroom—remains stronger than ever. Fundraising efforts continue

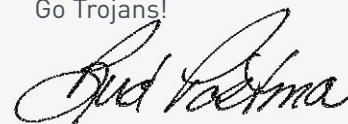
to drive our vision forward, allowing us to expand facilities, elevate programs, and provide unmatched opportunities for our student-athletes. We are focused on making Dakota State University not just a destination, but THE destination.

Most importantly, our student-athletes continue to rise to the occasion. Their dedication, resilience, and success — academically and athletically — are what fuel our pride every single day. They represent Trojan Nation with passion and purpose, and they continue to inspire everyone around them.

As we look ahead, I invite you to stay engaged. Pack the stands, bring the energy, and be part of the excitement. There is something special happening here, and the future of DSU Athletics has never been brighter.

Thank you for being such an important part of our journey.

Go Trojans!



Bud Postma

Director of Athletics
Dakota State University



WELCOME

MORE THAN



FANS

By: *Jen Burris*

THE “FIRST DUDE” AND PRESIDENT JOSÉ-MARIE GRIFFITHS

Before Dakota State University had a mascot, there was another fixture at every Trojan Athletics event: Don King, the “First Dude” of DSU.

King’s love of athletics began early and continued throughout his life, so when his wife, Dr. José-Marie Griffiths, joined Dakota State University as president, he quickly became acquainted with the university and community through Trojan Athletics — earning the affectionate nickname of “First Dude.”

Not only did he attend games across all sports, but he would frequently stop by practices and was often found courtside in the Fieldhouse during basketball games. At times, he even traveled with Trojan teams to away competitions.

“He really just enjoyed watching the players and watching them grow and evolve,” Griffiths said.

King was a four-sport athlete in high school and later played basketball at the University of Wyoming. Griffiths also shared a background in athletics, having competed in three sports in high school and field hockey in college.

While King always loved watching sports and was a longtime Washington Football Team fan, his interests shifted more toward collegiate athletics after the couple moved from the Washington, D.C., area to Tennessee. He continued that interest when they moved to Madison.

At Dakota State, that passion deepened through the community. Unlike larger universities they had experienced, DSU’s smaller size and community connections allowed for closer relationships with student-athletes.

King embraced those connections fully. An often-weekly visitor to China Moon for lunch, he often would engage with the many student-athletes visiting the buffet, getting to know them beyond their roles in their sports. He also connected with them

at the barber shop and occasionally would dine with some of the parents of student-athletes at other restaurants around town.

Through those interactions, King developed a deep appreciation for the ambitions and lives of student-athletes beyond competition. He especially valued building relationships with both the athletes and their families, Griffiths shared.

When he wasn’t connecting with student-athletes, he remained active in the broader community, attending Rotary Club and Kiwanis meetings and visiting the high school library.

Griffiths appreciated just how engaged he had become in the community.

“He’s out there talking to people all the time,” she said. “We were meeting people and getting to know the community, and it’s much easier when there are two of you.”

She enjoyed learning more about the student-athletes from her husband and hearing the athletics stats while attending games, thanks to his extensive sports memory.

As King’s health began to decline, Griffiths grew concerned about him sitting courtside, and they began moving further from the action. But that didn’t stop him from avidly following every play and celebrating the wins.

Later, when he broke his hip and was hospitalized, Donna Fawbush, former DSU Director of Events, brought King a laptop so he could continue watching the games. When DSU students learned he had become seriously ill, they showed their support at a home basketball game, holding signs in his honor.

“I was with him at the hospital, pointing out all the signs and banners that said, ‘Go Don King,’ ‘Get Well,’ and more,” Griffiths said. “At that point, we knew he didn’t have much longer, so it was really a touching gesture.”

When King passed in 2019, the Dakota Prairie Playhouse was filled to capacity for his memorial service.

“I think one-third of the playhouse was student-athletes,” Griffiths said. “So once again, it was very moving. This community that had accepted us, embraced us, and we became a part of it.”



CARVING HIS OWN LEGACY

By: Andrew Sogn

A second chance is not always part of the plan. For Hayden Leighty, it became the path that brought him back to the game he loved, and ultimately to Dakota State.

Leighty's baseball story began with a family trip to Chicago. After watching the Chicago Cubs in the friendly confines of Wrigley Field, Leighty said he "kind of begged my parents to let me play baseball." From that point on, the sport became an integral part of his life in Rapid City and seemed destined to remain part of his future.

That trajectory shifted during his senior year of high school. Despite earning attention from collegiate programs as a junior, Leighty turned his focus fully to academics at Rapid City Stevens High School. He soon enrolled at the University of Minnesota to study biomedical engineering.

It was a practical decision, but one that left something missing. "I was missing that thing I loved, which was baseball," Leighty said.

Without the structure and camaraderie of a team, his college experience felt incomplete. Midway through his first year in the Twin Cities, Leighty decided to think about what might come next. What followed was a return to the ballfield for a "super senior" summer with perennial American Legion baseball powerhouse, Rapid City Post 22.

That second chance quickly turned into a defining moment. During the 2024 state tournament, Leighty delivered one of the strongest performances of his career, throwing a complete game in front of Dakota State head coach Derrion Hardie and pitching coach Daniel Rutan.

That statement gave proof to others, and himself, that his goal of pitching in college was still within reach.

During his recruitment to DSU, conversations with the coaching staff stood out, particularly around player development and the use of analytics. The program's emphasis on measurable growth — including pitch tracking, performance metrics, and individualized development — aligned with Leighty's academic interests and competitive mindset.

Now a junior majoring in biology with plans to add exercise science to his studies, Leighty sees a clear connection between the classroom and the mound. His studies in anatomy and physiology inform how he approaches pitching mechanics, recovery, and injury prevention — an integration that is intentional at DSU.

"The classes here are super hands-on, which I love," Leighty said. "It's been interesting connecting what I'm learning in the classroom to what happens on the field, especially as a pitcher. Knowing the anatomy and physiology of your arm, how it moves ... and then how to prevent and rehab injuries."

Equally important has been the team environment.

"I can honestly say I've never been part of a team that's so close," Leighty said.

That culture has positioned him as a leader on a young roster. Having navigated uncertainty himself, Leighty is intentional about supporting teammates as they adjust to college baseball.

"I know what it's like to be the new guy and maybe feeling a little uncomfortable, so I do whatever I can to help out," he said. "I'm here because I love the game, and I feel like I'm growing into that mentor role."

Playing closer to home has added another dimension. With family able to attend games, the moments on the field carry added meaning, reinforcing the decision that brought him back.

Leighty's path to DSU was not a linear one, but the second chance he embraced has become a foundation for growth, leadership, and a renewed appreciation for the game that never let him go.



CHAMPIONS OF



Left to right: Emily Dvorak, Alivia Bickett, Aaliyah Bertelsen, Lilly Young, Bella Maxwell, Kiana Mouna, McKenna McIlravy

CHARACTER

By: Jen Burris

Trojan student-athletes are well known in the Madison community. Many babysit, help train elementary, middle, and high school student-athletes, serve alongside nonprofits, and volunteer year-round — not just for the annual Trojans Give Back Day of Service.

Today, that spirit of giving back is displayed in a variety of ways, including working with community non-profits to package food for families in need, or mentoring younger members of the Madison community in weekly programming.

That commitment to service is recognized not only by Dakota State and the Madison community but also through the NAIA's Champions of Character program.

The program highlights student-athletes who demonstrate five core values: integrity, respect, responsibility, sportsmanship, and servant leadership.

In addition to recognition for student-athletes, Dakota State has also been recognized as a five-star institution at the gold level. Institutions are evaluated based on their commitment to Champions of Character, earning points in areas such as character training, conduct in competition, academic focus, character recognition, and character promotion. Additional points are awarded for strong student-athlete grade point averages and minimal or no ejections during competition.

DSU'S 2025 NAIA CHAMPIONS OF CHARACTER

Baseball

Connor Raney (*North Star*)

Football

Cole Paulson (*Frontier*)

Women's Cross Country

Brooke Beaucaire (*Frontier*)

Men's Cross Country

Blake Schmiedt (*Frontier*)

Women's Basketball

Kristine Biniek (*North Star*)

Men's Basketball

Brayden Pankonen (*North Star*)

Women's Track


RayLee Wallis (*North Star*)

Men's Track

Zachary Haugen (*North Star*)

Softball

Hannah Feser (*North Star*)



3.47
average cumulative GPA
of student-athletes

Athletics GPA by sport

Women's Basketball

3.645

Men's Basketball

3.505

Football

3.132

Softball

3.649

Baseball

3.331

Women's Cross Country

3.899

Men's Cross Country

3.685

Women's Track & Field

3.780

Men's Track & Field

3.360

Volleyball

3.626

Women's Soccer

3.210

Women's Esports

3.121

Men's Esports

3.191



LEADING THE RISE

By: Andrew Sogn

As a quarterback, every decision is visible and every outcome is shared. In those moments, leadership is not optional. Tray Hettick has embraced that responsibility.

At Dakota State University, Hettick has grown into a leader defined not just by performance, but by presence. He steps into pressure, sets the tone and brings others with him, qualities that mirror a DSU football program and institution continuing to rise with purpose.

Raised in Selby, South Dakota, Hettick grew up in a close-knit community where sports, family, and accountability were inseparable. As the son of a coach and educator, he spent his early years in gyms and on fields, learning not just how to compete, but how to lead. That foundation continues to guide him today.

"I've never been someone who just follows the crowd," Hettick said.



That instinct to set a standard rather than chase one aligns with a DSU athletics program actively redefining itself. When Hettick chose DSU, he saw momentum and believed in the opportunity to help build something stronger.

“I take pride in being an example and setting the standard for everyone around me,” Hettick said.

That belief has been tested throughout his career, including season-ending injuries that disrupted his early trajectory. Instead of derailing his progress, those challenges sharpened his perspective.

“I just continue to trust in God’s plan and take every day as a blessing,” he said.

Hettick’s return to the field in 2025 came with a renewed focus. He led the Trojans while earning all-conference recognition and throwing for more than 2,000 yards in a season shaped as much by perseverance as performance.

Through it all, his leadership has remained steady. Teammates rely on him not just for execution, but for consistency, and coaches trust him to represent the program. His selection to the Captain’s Council, an honor he does “not take lightly,” reflects that credibility and gives him a voice in shaping the student-athlete experience across DSU.

Hettick credits his resilience to two anchors: faith and family. Both were strengthened during a pivotal moment in his childhood, when his younger sister underwent a liver transplant. That experience reframed challenges and reinforced a long-term perspective that now shapes how he

approaches competition, setbacks, and success.

At DSU, he has found an environment that reflects those values. Strong relationships with coaches and faculty, continued investment in facilities, and a clear institutional vision have reinforced his decision to be part of the program’s growth.

Hettick is not focused on what has already been achieved. He is focused on what comes next: raising expectations, building consistency, and positioning DSU for sustained success.

“We’re not satisfied,” Hettick said. “There’s more to be accomplished. Our guys bring it every single day, and they bring the most out of me.”

His story reflects a broader truth about athletics at Dakota State.

When athletics thrive, the University thrives. The impact of philanthropic investment in athletics extends far beyond wins and losses — it shapes leaders, strengthens communities, and transforms lives.





A LEGACY OF BASEBALL, A GIFT FOR THE FUTURE

By: Jen Burris

Before the first flowers bloom in spring, Anthony and Kim DeMaria are already flying across the country on the weekends to watch their son, Cameron DeMaria, play baseball for the Trojans.

Spending the last few years attending nearly all of Cameron's games has given Anthony the opportunity to spend time with his son. It's also allowed him to know his son's teammates and their families — something he's thoroughly enjoyed.

In addition to Cameron, who is a graduate student earning his MBA while playing first base for the Trojans, the DeMaria family have two older sons, Alec and Blake, both of whom played college baseball. Alec now serves as head baseball coach for Valley City State University, and Blake is an Army Officer Candidate.

"The biggest part of my life for the past 26 years has been watching them play or coach baseball," Anthony said.



Athletics have long been part of Anthony's own story as well. He swam at UC Davis while earning his undergraduate degree.

That experience, along with the family's love of baseball, inspired a recent \$350,000 gift to complete the DeMaria Family Baseball Locker Room in the Beacom PREMIER Complex. The locker room will feature new lockers designed to enhance comfort, functionality, and team culture for the Trojan Baseball Team.

The DeMarias, longtime residents of the Fresno, California area, are dedicated to building community development through athletics. Anthony served as president of the area's youth league for 10 years and later joined the ownership board of advisors for the Fresno Grizzlies, the Colorado Rockies' Single-A affiliate.

He also established a summer college baseball team, the Fresno A's, which plays at Chukchansi Park, the 12,000-seat home of the Grizzlies. The team completes a 44-game schedule each summer, with players from around the country referred by their coaches and housed locally during the season. Last year, three DSU players were on the team. This year, two will compete in Fresno.

Through these experiences, Anthony has seen firsthand the role athletics play in developing young people, from teamwork and discipline to competition and social growth. He has enjoyed watching players from different backgrounds come together to play as a team.

"I think college athletics is a huge development enhancer for all students," he said.

Anthony also understands the importance of outside financial support in sustaining collegiate athletics programs and is proud to support Trojan baseball.

"Dakota State's been a great place," he said. "I've enjoyed it tremendously. I've enjoyed the city, but most of all, I've enjoyed the time that my son has had there and his ability to develop and grow in that environment."

Anthony is a lawyer practicing civil defense work and owns the DeMaria Law Firm. Kim volunteers with various nonprofits and works with renowned and emerging authors.



From left to right: Blake DeMaria, Kim & Anthony DeMaria, Cameron DeMaria, Whitnee Curry

MORE THAN A COMMITMENT

By: Jen Burris & Andrew Sogn

Aislyn Holden made her mark in the Dakota State University history books before stepping foot onto the pitch at the Dan Beacom Track & Soccer Complex.

As the first women's soccer player to sign with the newly established program, Holden wasn't just committing to a team — she was committing to help build one. For Holden, a freshman from Great Falls, Montana, the opportunity to be part of something new was exactly what she was looking for.

"Just being able to play in college is amazing," Holden said, "but getting to grow a program from scratch with the girls on this team makes it even more special."

Holden's path to wearing a Trojan uniform began at the age of four, learning the basics of the game from her dad, whom she calls her "biggest inspiration." Over the years, the game became more than just a sport, serving as common ground for their relationship to grow.

"My dad was my coach pretty much all the way to middle school," Holden said. "Honestly, I think that's how we got closer. We just had something to relate to. He's always been my biggest support system and ultimately the main person I can always rely on."

Although she always dreamed of playing college soccer, Holden's recruitment didn't begin until midway through her junior year of high school, when a club team invited her to join for a weekend tournament in Arizona. That opportunity gave her the confidence to pursue the next level of competition, and soon after, DSU head coach Todd Stank reached out.

During her campus visit, Holden was drawn to both the program's vision and the honesty she experienced throughout the recruiting process.

"He (Coach Stank) was very upfront that the first few years might not be perfect," she said. "But he also shared his vision for what the program could become, and I trusted that."

Holden's first year has been filled with growth, on the field and in the classroom.

Alongside her teammates, Holden helped the Trojans reach the conference tournament and earn the program's first postseason win. Off the field, Holden is pursuing a degree in elementary education with minors in reading and English language learning — a path inspired by her aunt, who works as a teacher.

For Holden, the experience reinforced exactly why she chose to be part of the program from the very beginning.

"We all rely on each other," she said. "That's the biggest thing I've learned you don't have to do everything by yourself."







FINDING A WAY BACK HOME

By: Andrew Sogn

Aiden Jensen's path to a Trojan basketball jersey took a winding path, but now, he's right where he belongs.

Jensen's path to college basketball took shape later than some. Early on, he played for fun, not with a long-term plan. That shifted during high school as both his mindset and his frame changed. A growth spurt — from 6-foot-3 as a freshman to 6-foot-9 — helped redefine his role, and a dedication to developing his craft brought him to the next level.

After growing up in Madison, the next step felt clear: explore somewhere new, test himself, and figure things out away from home.

"I wanted to get out of town," he said. "Go live by myself; that was my thinking."

He did just that, heading to a university away from home to continue his basketball career.

Within a year, however, something felt off. So, he made a change, returning to Madison and joining the DSU's Men's Basketball team.

The difference was immediate.

"There were four or five guys who just took me under their wing (at DSU)," Jensen said. "They'd hang out off the court, get me in the gym. That made it an easy transition."

The game itself felt different, too.

"Coming back here, I know most of the people in the stands," Jensen said. "It just means a lot to go out there and play for the Trojans."

At DSU, Jensen's commitment is now part of a program working to move forward. That work, alongside his teammates and under head coach Kevin Williamson, has allowed the Trojans to build momentum toward a hopeful future.

He sees that progress as part of something bigger.

"I think it's really cool to be part of making the basketball team better," he said. "To help it climb upward, that means something."

For Jensen, the experience is also about more than wins or minutes. It is about finding the right fit on the court, in the locker room, and in a place that feels connected to who he is.

That connection shows up every time he steps on the floor.

"Coming back here, it's different," Jensen said. "It means something."





Senate Bill 116 was signed on March 2, 2026 and approved the construction of DSU's Indoor Athletics Dome.
From left to right: Representative Tim Walburg (District 8), Braxton Lacher, Mike McKelvey, Representative Al Novstrup (District 3), Lt. Governor Tony Venhuizen, Governor Larry Rhoden, Senator Casey Crabtree (District 8), First Lady Sandy Rhoden, Bud Postma, and Stacy Krusemark.



DSU INDOOR ATHLETICS DOME BREAKS GROUND ON YEAR-ROUND FUTURE

The DSU Indoor Athletics Dome will provide year-round space for soccer, football, softball, baseball, track, and more — serving college athletics, high school sports, youth programs, and community events. This facility serves as a major win for our students and powerful investment in our region. Construction on the facility is set to begin this summer, with a ground-breaking ceremony to be scheduled. Expected completion of the dome is late winter 2027.

“This facility is a game-changer for Dakota State University, allowing our students access to competition and practice space year-round. We are thankful for the support to bring this vision to life, and look forward to seeing our Trojans continue their rise with new facilities behind them.” — Bud Postma, Director of Athletics.





4,000 MILES TO DSU

By: Jen Burris & Andrew Sogn

Valerija Curikova has been running for most of her life. What began in elementary school in Latvia eventually carried her more than 4,000 miles to Dakota State University, where the Trojans' cross country standout now balances collegiate competition with studying cyber operations.

Curikova first discovered distance running in second grade. After consistently finishing first in school physical education races, a coach invited her to join a club team, building the foundation that would eventually bring her to Madison and the Trojans.

Originally a middle-distance runner, Curikova tried cross country shortly before arriving at DSU. She quickly found she preferred the variety of the course compared to running laps on a track.

"I fell for cross country way more than track," she said. "The races are different ... and way more exciting for me."

Her time at Dakota State has been memorable. Curikova has won a cross country conference title, broken a school record by more than a minute and a half, and competed at the national meet in Washington. Crossing the finish line there remains one of her most vivid memories.

"I still remember how grateful I was at the finish line and then hearing the coaches say I got 35th out of hundreds of people," she said. "That was probably the best day in my life."

The journey to Madison was not without challenges. Arriving from Eastern Europe meant adjusting to a new language, culture, and campus environment.

"When I came here, it was kind of scary — these new people, new language," Curikova said.

The team helped provide a welcoming atmosphere, and that sense of community has become one of the most meaningful parts of her experience.

"Our team is really close," she said. "We have classes together. We live together. We run together."

Finding her place in Madison has also allowed Curikova to test her limits and learn important life lessons. From competing in the 3,000-meter steeplechase and jumping into cold water during a race to fighting back from injury, Curikova reflected that "the life of an athlete has bright times and very dark times, but it makes you better, smarter, and stronger."

Along with her athletics career, Curikova values the flexibility and opportunities within DSU's cyber operations program, including research and faculty mentorship.

For Curikova, the combination of academics, athletics, and community has made Madison feel far from small.

"There are so many opportunities here," she said. "You can be more than just a student-athlete."



FROM FAN TO TROJAN STANDOUT

By: Jen Burris

Tabor Teel ('26) grew up watching DSU Women's Basketball games; today, she's a standout player for the Trojans.

"I would say that coming to Dakota State games was my first experience with what college basketball looked like," Tabor said.

Her mother and brother both attended Dakota State University and were student-athletes. Kazzi Foster-Teel ('00) played basketball, and Tabor's brother, Connor Teel ('19), played football.

Tabor grew up inspired by watching DSU players like BreeAna Olson and Kennedy Wagner, but she didn't always picture herself playing college basketball at DSU.

"Honestly, I thought that I wanted to go to a school far away," Tabor said.

However, when senior year arrived, she didn't want to be far from family. The close proximity of Dakota State and the excitement of the plans for a new athletics facility and recently opened brand-new residence halls on campus led her to choose the Trojans.

When she joined the team, she was a little intimidated by the basketball team's history of success. Tabor describes her first year as a big learning experience where she questioned her future in the sport after not playing much her freshman year. Despite that disappointment, a conversation with her coaches inspired her to stay and keep working toward more playing time.

"I knew that I could give more, and so that whole summer between freshman and sophomore year, I was in the gym every single day with my coaches," Tabor said.

By the time her sophomore season rolled around, she started getting court time.





“It’s the best feeling,” she said. “That’s probably the biggest year of my life at I’ve experienced in my entire life.”

Not long after starting her sophomore year, she embraced her role as a defender, blocking and finding open shooters and was named Defensive Player of the Year her sophomore year. That success inspired her to keep working hard in the gym throughout the summer.

As team captain her junior year, Tabor took the lessons she had learned from upperclassmen and worked to instill that in her younger teammates. The team won the conference championship her junior year, earning a spot in the NAIA National Tournament.

Then came more awards.

Tabor was named the 2024-25 North Star Player of the Year and a Second Team All-American as a junior, and as a senior picked up 2025-26 North Star Player of the Year and First Team All-American among other accolades.

As her senior year, Tabor’s enjoying having fun and playing freely in a new conference.

As her collegiate career nears its end, she’s appreciative of the memories she’s made as part of Trojan Athletics.

“I just feel nothing but gratitude for my entire experience,” Tabor said. “I wouldn’t change a single thing because it made me grow into the player that I am now.”

“I can wholeheartedly say that my time here has prepared me for graduating and the next stage of my life,” she said.

Today’s Dakota State University student-athletes are outstanding not only in competition but also in the classroom. They represent the University with distinction, demonstrating discipline, perseverance, and a commitment to personal growth. Participation in athletics strengthens resilience, emotional intelligence, leadership, and a sense of community, while fostering respect for diverse perspectives on qualities that serve graduates throughout their lives and careers.



Austin Kaiser



FROM VALORANT PLAYERS TO COACHES

By: Jen Burris & Andrew Sogn

Aleks Billey and Austin Kaiser spend part of each week coaching Valorant for DSU's esports team, sharing lessons they learned during their time as student-athletes in the program.

"They have numerous accolades throughout their career as varsity athletes, including the longest consecutive win streak

in DSU Esports history and the most championship trophies earned," said Andy Roland, head esports coach.

Billey first began playing esports while recovering from a hockey injury in his senior year of high school that required emergency surgery. During this time, he started playing Valorant at the lowest rank and quickly rose to the highest.

Already committed to attending DSU, Billey connected with the university's Valorant team online as his skills developed. The team expressed interest in having him join, and after some thought, Billey came on board.

His first season brought growing pains for the esports program, but the team earned its first trophy during his second year and began a lengthy winning streak. Today, Billey competes at the professional level in Valorant and brings that experience back to the DSU program as a coach.

Kaiser's path looked different. He was just learning to play Valorant when he arrived at DSU as a freshman but saw the esports team as an opportunity to get involved on campus and build connections.

Starting on the JV team, Kaiser worked his way up to varsity before transitioning into a coaching role during the fall 2025 semester.

"Both Kaiser and Billey are born leaders who have stayed on to coach our current varsity Valorant team, which is comprised of all freshmen," Roland said. "They have played in our system as athletes and understand what it means to continue building DSU Esports for the next generation of athletes."

As coaches, both emphasize the importance of communication and accountability to their players. Kaiser notes that being part of the team helps students learn the importance of showing up on time, maintaining the right mindset, and communicating clearly with teammates. Billey focuses on teaching the student-athletes resilience, learning from mistakes, and working through difficult situations.

They carry those lessons into other areas of their lives. Kaiser is a senior and adjunct instructor teaching creative coding. He serves in the military and works as a solo developer for his own company. Billey is a master's student who works in the MadLabs® and is a part of AI Sweden's Industrial Immersion summer program.

"Their leadership, guidance, experience, and pride for our program embody everything DSU Esports," Roland said.



Aleks Billey and Austin Kaiser



From left to right: Aleks Billey, Richard Nunstedt, Frida Piscator Pettersson

THREE SISTERS, ONE TEAM

By: Jen Burris & Andrew Sogn

Junior volleyball player Macey Wathen jokes that, despite her status as the middle child of the family, both of her sisters followed her to college.

Macey's older sister, Hailey, originally attended Minot State University before transferring to Dakota State and joining the volleyball team the spring of her sophomore year, shortly after Macey committed to DSU.

Now, just over three years later, Macey's younger sister, Sydney, has joined her at Dakota State and on the Trojan Volleyball Team.

Macey chose DSU because it was one of the only schools that would let her play two sports.

"I actually played both volleyball and basketball my freshman and sophomore years," she said.

While Macey knew she would eventually pick one sport, she wanted to challenge herself and see how long she could do both. Her success on the volleyball court led her to choose that sport long-term, but she remains friends with her basketball counterparts and continues her love of that sport as a fan.



Hailey Wathen and Macey Wathen

Sydney watched Hailey and Macey play together at DSU and initially planned to attend a different college. But after visiting campus, she was drawn to the team and its culture, leading her to follow her sisters to Madison.

The transition from high school to DSU was easy for Sydney because both of her sisters still live in Madison off campus.

"Being able to escape, especially the first few months, to have somewhere to go, eat food, get advice from them about classes, I think that made it so much easier," Sydney said.

While Hailey and Macey were both hitters and occasionally competed at the same position, Macey and Sydney play different roles. Sydney contributes in the back row as a defensive specialist, avoiding any on-court sibling rivalry.

Their differences extend beyond the court as well. Macey, a marketing major, is more outspoken, while Sydney, who studies exercise science, describes herself as more reserved.

Another benefit of all the sisters playing for the same university is the ability for their family to watch them play together. The sisters were used to their parents and grandparents coming to see them play, and being on the same team allows them to do so more frequently.

As the Wathen era of DSU volleyball begins to wind down, the sisters look back on their shared experience with gratitude.

"It's crazy (that next year is my last)," Macey said. "It truly went by so fast. I'm really grateful for all the opportunities that we've had here. I tell our coach, 'Thanks for giving me my future bridesmaids.'"

"I know I always have coaches who are going to support me and cheer for me the rest of my life," she said.

Sydney echoed that in her own way, sharing that "the community and friendships you'll make is definitely the best part."



Center: Sydney Wathen

FINDING FAMILY ON THE FIELD

By: Jen Burris & Andrew Sogn

Roanna Riggins took a leap of faith in signing with Dakota State University, trading in the warmth of Southern California for the four seasons of the Midwest with DSU Softball. What she found along the way was a community that helped shape both her college experience and her growth as an athlete.

Hailing from San Diego, California, Riggins began playing softball at age six and has been dedicated to the sport ever since. That dedication brought her to a high school tournament in Las Vegas, where a strong weekend of play drew the attention of DSU coaches and opened the door to a college experience far from home.

“I didn’t have an in-person visit (during recruitment), just a virtual one,” Riggins said. “But I really wanted to leave California and see something different.”

The transition from a major metropolitan area to a smaller community came with challenges. During her first year, adjusting to the slower pace of life and the distance from home took time, but she gradually learned to embrace her new environment and the people around her.

That support system quickly grew within the Trojan softball team.

“A lot of the girls are from California, so that helped,” Riggins said. “But the whole team becomes your family away from your family. When you’re homesick, they’re the people who are there for you.”

Now a senior majoring in English education with a minor in business, Riggins has spent all four years at DSU balancing academics, athletics, and work at the Karl E. Mundt Library. Through it all, softball has remained central to her college journey.

One of her favorite parts of college softball is the experience of competing together as a team, especially during the conference tournament when the team travels and spends extended time together.

Beyond wins and losses, the experience has also shaped her perspective.

“College sports can be hard mentally,” she said. “But it also makes you a better person. You learn to rely on your teammates and give your best, even when things are difficult.”

As graduation approaches, Riggins plans to continue exploring new places after college, carrying with her the friendships, experiences, and lessons she found at DSU.





ACADEMIC ALL-AMERICAN

By: Andrew Sogn

Dakota State University student-athletes continue to demonstrate that academic and athletic excellence are not competing priorities, but complementary pursuits, as shown by 2025 Academic All-Americans Nolan Slominski and Madalyn Groft.

Selected by College Sports Communicators, the Academic All-America program recognizes student-athletes who perform at a high level in competition while maintaining elite academic standards. Honorees must meet rigorous criteria, including significant playing time, strong grade point averages, and a national voting process that evaluates both academic and athletic achievement.

For Slominski, a junior from Blair, Nebraska, the recognition reflects a balance built through consistent performance. A two-time All-American on the track, he has competed at the national level in events including the 4x800-meter relay, contributing to podium finishes while pursuing a degree in cyber operations and starting his master's degree.

"To get All-American is amazing, and then to get



Academic All-American too ... it shows how well DSU is doing," Slominski said.

He credits DSU's academic environment and team culture for making that balance possible, noting that from the first team meeting of the year, "academics is very big for (our program). We want to be the top team in the nation for GPA."

Faculty engagement and hands-on coursework reinforce learning beyond the classroom, while team expectations prioritize academic performance alongside competition. That commitment often means completing exams or assignments while traveling for meets.

Groft, a graduate student from Mellette, South Dakota, has built a similar standard of excellence through her work on the volleyball court and in the classroom. A key contributor for the Trojans, she earned All-American recognition while maintaining the academic performance required for national honors.

"Putting my best work toward everything I do is a huge priority for me," Groft said. "In the classroom, that meant doing extra assignments, reaching out to professors, and taking the time to get one-on-one help. On the court, it meant putting in extra reps before and after practice. What is given to us is the minimum effort we should be putting in.

The real progress comes when you go beyond that."

She said the recognition reflects both personal effort and the environment at DSU.

“It is an incredible honor,” Groft said. “It shows that putting in extra work as both a student and an athlete pays off, and that DSU has professors and coaches who are willing to help you succeed.”

That support is reinforced through a culture that prioritizes academics across DSU Athletics.

“The biggest thing I took away from DSU is the community,” Groft said. “Our coaches and teammates held academics as the top priority, whether that was scheduled study time or completing coursework during travel. People are always willing to help or connect you with someone who can.”

That structure reflects a broader commitment within DSU Athletics. Coaches set clear expectations around academic success, and teams consistently rank among the top performers

nationally in grade point average. The result is an environment where achievement in one area reinforces success in the other.

Together, their recognition highlights the strength of DSU’s model and the outcomes it produces.

Today’s Dakota State University student-athletes are outstanding not only in competition but also in the classroom. They represent the university with distinction, demonstrating discipline, perseverance, and a commitment to personal growth. Participation in athletics strengthens resilience, emotional intelligence, leadership, and a sense of community, while fostering respect for diverse perspectives—qualities that serve graduates throughout their lives and careers.



FROM ALUM TO ADVOCATE

Dave Geiver’s connection to Dakota State University began with a simple decision that felt right. Hailing from Iroquois, South Dakota, Geiver chose DSU for the opportunity to pursue both academics and athletics. That experience, he says, shaped his life through lasting relationships and a strong sense of community.

Today, Geiver serves as chair of the DSU Foundation Board, a role he accepted not out of obligation, but as a continuation of his lifelong commitment to giving back. His involvement evolved over time — from engaged alumnus to advisory roles and leadership — guided by a belief that supporting DSU is ultimately about supporting students.

“For me, it’s about financial support and access,” Geiver said. “Higher education is more expensive than ever, and we need to do everything we can to help students succeed.”

Geiver takes pride in DSU’s continued momentum, from academic innovation to expanded facilities, while noting that the university’s close-knit environment remains unchanged. He sees ongoing opportunity to strengthen that trajectory through alumni engagement and philanthropy.

His message to fellow alumni is simple: reconnect and see how DSU has risen. Reestablishing or building relationships, and rediscovering DSU’s impact, naturally leads to deeper involvement.

Ready to make a difference for Dakota State University? Reach out the DSU Advancement Team at foundation@dsu.edu for more information on how to give.



Read more about Madalyn here



THROWING TOWARD GREATNESS

By: Jen Burris & Andrew Sogn

Dakota State freshman Oliver Tordsen grew up surrounded by competition. As the youngest of four brothers in a family of standout scholar-athletes, he learned early what it meant to work toward something bigger than himself, both in athletics and in the classroom.

His brother, Connor, was one of the most accomplished throwers in DSU history, winning a national championship in discus in 2023 and earning multiple All-American honors. Another brother, Sawyer, currently plays offensive tackle at Augustana University, while the eldest, Walker, paved the way for his brothers in athletics before pursuing work in the medical field through the University of Minnesota.

Watching that success up close helped shape Oliver's path. Now, the youngest Tordsen, from Fairmont, Minnesota, is building his own legacy with the Trojan track and field program.

"My first interaction with DSU was through my brother (Connor)," Oliver said. "Coach (Alex) Glover reached out and talked about the program and the double major in biology and exercise science. I knew I wanted to do something in the medical field, so those really went hand in hand."

Oliver, who plans to pursue dentistry after graduating, competes in multiple throwing events for Dakota State, with discus being his favorite — not just for the distance, but for the precision it requires.

"A lot of people think you can just go out there and muscle it," he said. "But there are a lot of tiny details you have to get exactly right.

When you get a good throw, you can tell right away."

That attention to detail has already helped him make an early impact. As a freshman, Oliver qualified for nationals with B-standard marks in both the shot put and weight throw during the indoor season, and in April 2026 he shattered DSU's men's discus school record with a throw of 55.33 meters. That toss, nearly one full meter beyond his brother Connor's previous record (54.57 meters), is just the beginning of what Oliver aims to accomplish.

With strong support from teammates and coaches, Oliver remains focused on continued growth with lofty goals ahead.

"I want to continue building and just keep doing what I'm doing," Oliver said. "I'd like to keep qualifying for nationals. I'd love to win a couple of national titles. I think that'd be awesome."



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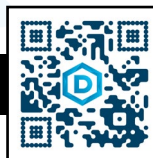
FRIDAY, SEPT. 25

- » Late morning flight to Oregon
- » Check in at hotel
- » Afternoon group activity
- » Evening group dinner

SATURDAY, SEPT. 26

- » Pregame brunch
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** Trip schedule and pricing are subject to change pending final confirmation*



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