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Life lessons: Perspectives on the student-athlete experience

Leroy Davies-Venn '98 majored in biology and played defensive tackle for the Furman football team. Now an orthodontist in Atlanta, he has remained close to several former teammates (and Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity brothers) who also pursued careers in healthcare. He submitted this commentary on how he and his friends balanced their academic and athletic lives at Furman — and went on to apply the lessons they learned to their vocations.

Student-athletes at institutions of higher learning are often defined strictly by their physical attributes. Many people, however, are unaware of the strenuous schedules these students face, and of the difficulties they encounter in balancing their dual commitments to sports and academics.

At Furman, though, it is not uncommon for student-athletes to achieve great things both on the playing field and in the classroom.

Among my many friends from Furman days are three gentlemen who joined me in accepting the challenges of being a student-athlete — and went on to successful careers in healthcare.

Clayton Gibson III '95, a linebacker, went on to attend Life College and is now a chiropractor in Atlanta. Rico Perkins '00, a safety, is a resident in anesthesiology in Louisville, Ky., after graduating from medical school at the University of Louisville last spring. Kevin Jackson '98, a cornerback, is a pediatric dentist in Atlanta, having earned his degree from Meharry Medical College and completed his residency at the University of Tennessee. I attended dental school at Meharry as well and did my residency at Howard University before becoming an associate in a group in Atlanta.

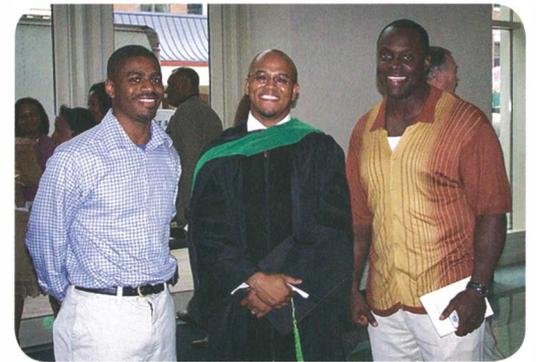
Kevin and I actually negotiated dental school together. Today we see each other often and share insights into each others' cases and practices.

All of us took the lessons we learned on the football field and applied them to our respective post-graduate training — and ultimately to our professions. Three specific tenets my student-athlete experience instilled in me are preparation, patience and perseverance.

> **Preparation.** As we did during our football days, we continue to hone our skills through practice, study and review, not just of new techniques but of fundamental principles. In our professions, lack of preparation is not an option. Patients depend on us to anticipate and recognize problems and find solutions, all of which goes back to the importance of preparation. In preparing for games, we studied opponents' tendencies, developed game plans and then practiced them so that we would be fully prepared. Similarly, the "practice" of healthcare revolves around executing treatments until they are reflex. If we are fortunate enough to devise a new protocol along the way, that's even better.

> **Patience.** Oftentimes in athletics, getting the chance to perform can be an exercise in patience. Similarly, in healthcare the opportunity to actually "perform" comes only after years of study and hard work. If you know that your chance will eventually come, the results usually prove to be worth the time and effort. At Furman, I didn't get significant playing time until my senior season, and at Meharry, I was well into my studies before I ever "managed" a patient. Moreover, in orthodontics, treatments typically last about two years. This requires that I coach my patients to be patient — and to appreciate gradual results. I often pray for patient patients.

> **Perseverance.** Sometimes in orthodontics, the simplest of cases proves to be an exhausting chore. But I can't allow a case that doesn't progress as planned to hinder my self-confidence or to affect other cases. In football terminology, one setback shouldn't determine how I play the



Kevin Jackson (left) and Leroy Davies-Venn (right) were there for Rico Perkins' graduation from medical school.

rest of the game. One of the major philosophies I took away from athletics was, "The athlete that I must work hardest to dominate is me." I had to learn not to be so afraid of failure that it would inhibit my ability to perform well.

Having balanced the demands of athletics and academics as undergraduates, my friends and I had no problem with time management in graduate school, and we were able to cope with the long hours and stress. We had learned to focus and concentrate, and we knew that after Furman, we could handle anything.

Today, as healthcare providers, we also understand the importance of developing trust and support, as we did in our relationships with coaches and teammates. And being African-Americans, the crash course in cultural diversity that was an automatic part of our Furman experiences helps us relate to a wide variety of patients.

Furman promotes and encourages high expectations and standards on the football field and in the classroom. As student-athletes, we got a double dose of Furman's commitment to excellence. In doing so we reaped many benefits that we will take with us throughout our lives — and, hopefully, that we will pass on to those who follow.