

An underwater photograph showing a swimmer's splash, with bubbles and water movement creating a dynamic, blue-toned scene. The water is clear, and the light reflects off the bubbles, creating a shimmering effect.

NURTURING STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH EXCEPTIONAL FACILITIES

by David Vinson, PhD

American cinema of the 1980s produced its share of unlikely heroes—Mikey Walsh and his team of misfits in *The Goonies*; a trio of middle-aged scientists who save New York City in *Ghostbusters*; a ragtag group of high schoolers who prevent WWII in *Red Dawn*.

But there is something uniquely unforgettable in Thornton Melon's "Triple Lindy" dive that wins for the fictitious Grand Lakes University the championship dive meet, thereby affirming Thornton's transformation from a philandering man-child to that of, well, a redeemed man-child.



I'm referring to *Back to School* starring Rodney Dangerfield as Thornton Melon, and the dive—the “Triple Lindy”—is the stuff of legend, at least within the “reality” of the film itself. We are told that a much younger Thornton completed it during his original college days; and in the climactic scene, he has now returned in the pear-shaped figure of Dangerfield to attempt it once more.

The dive, which defies physics as well as all common sense, involves a sequence of flips (forwards, backwards, and sideways) between a total of three diving boards, and concludes with Dangerfield's body positioned vertically and in perfect form as he hits the water with hardly a splash. The scene is unabashedly ridiculous, but part of what makes it so fun is that we relate as viewers to the appeal of witnessing first-hand a sporting miracle. Such moments, because they are so rare and unexpected, unite us all in celebration—and indeed, the crowd's reaction to the winning dive is exultant. It is a fitting climax to a film that's generous with memorable comedic gags.

Habits of Body and Mind

I wonder what student-athletes would make of the diving scene, given that Dangerfield was in his mid-60s during filming, and that he was—and

let's be gentle here—not in the best of physical shape. I imagine most would enjoy the film for the silly entertainment that it is, but I wouldn't blame them for rolling their eyes at the fantasy that Dangerfield's character could pull off a feat requiring such endurance and athleticism.

Student-athletes know what it takes to be great, and talent alone—even a “Triple Lindy” level of talent—offers little guarantee in the universe of competitive sports, and for the most obvious of reasons: not all student-athletes can be the best at what they do.

Student-athletes are deeply committed to habits of body and mind, and these are managed day by day with disciplined adherence to nutritional plans, exercise routines, and the study and practice of their craft. The smallest of differences in attitude and practice can be the difference between first and second place. Let's also not understate the role that exceptional athletic facilities play in helping our student-athletes reach their potential.

At private universities and colleges across the country, student-athletes rely on campus-based athletic facilities to maintain a level of health in mind and body that's necessary to excel in competitive sports.

Vanderbilt University's Hawkins Field

For a student body of approximately 13,000, the athletic facilities of Vanderbilt University are staggering. Taken together, the full range of available facilities reflects the essential role of athletics, not only at the university but also, more broadly, as a unifier within the city of Nashville. It is fitting that the campus is located in the heart of Nashville, only 1.5 miles from downtown.

As the only private institution in the Southeastern Conference, Vanderbilt University has maintained its high level of competitiveness with stellar athletics facilities that empower student-athletes while also meeting the demands of a region that's simply crazy about sports.

Hawkins Field is but one example of the institution's stellar athletics facilities. As one of the top college baseball parks in the country, Hawkins Field offers a classic baseball park atmosphere with its brick and rod-iron design, and yet it is also enhanced by modern innovations. These include a state-of-the-art press box, and all fans can enjoy chairback seats close to the field of play. The field itself is first-rate, both preventing bad hops and promoting great defensive play from infielders and outfielders alike.

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In 2009, permanent bleacher seating was added in the outfield, and a new trainer's room was created along with renovated dugouts. The latest enhancement, completed prior to the 2018 season, saw the construction of a 30,000-square foot facility with a tech-ready classroom, cardio room, fueling station, new and expanded weight room, current and pro player locker room, recruiting area, as well as coaches' and staff offices.

Graphics that highlight the Vanderbilt Commodore's rich history adorn the walls throughout. The enhancement also included moving the team's batting cages to a below-ground level.

Big-Time Athletic Facilities at Grinnell College

Located in Iowa, Grinnell College is home to the Charles Benson '39 Recreation and Athletic Center, which is the centerpiece of Grinnell's Pioneer Athletics. On the basis of the vast and impressive Benson Recreation and Athletic Center, one would never guess the intimate enrollment size at Grinnell (approximately 1,750). But there can be little doubt that athletics is integral to Grinnell's identity, since nearly one-third of its recent graduates participated in at least one of the institution's varsity sports.

The Benson Recreation and Athletic Center contains the 1,250-seat Darby Gymnasium, home to the men's and women's basketball and volleyball teams; a 500-seat natatorium with a 50-meter pool and moveable bulkheads; a six-lane 200-meter fieldhouse with seating for 400; an 8,000 square foot fitness center with cardiovascular and strength equipment; an auxiliary practice gymnasium; classroom and practice space; climbing and bouldering walls; racquetball courts; locker rooms; equipment rooms; and a concession lounge with wireless Internet access.

The considerable potential of student-athletes is nurtured at Grinnell, and the institution's commitment to athletics has even translated to recognition at the national scale. In 2005, for instance, Grinnell became the first Division III school featured in a regular season basketball game by the ESPN network family when it faced off against the Beloit Buccaneers on ESPN 2.

Texas Christian University's Amon G. Carter Stadium

Texas Christian University is known for its exciting, high-scoring brand of football. The

home of the Horned Frogs' football program is the Amon G. Carter Stadium, which has undergone multiple enhancements since its original construction in 1930. Most recently in 2012, the stadium benefitted from a massive upgrade, all funded by donor support.

The primary goal of the upgrade was to transform the historic Fort Worth stadium into the "Camden Yards" of collegiate football stadiums. The results have been transcendent thus far, not only helping with the recruitment process of top student-athletes around the country, but also providing current student-athletes with amenities designed to cultivate their considerable potential.

In the context of enhancing athletic facilities, perhaps not enough attention is assigned to the impact that the persistent roar of a crowd can have on the student-athletes themselves.

With the newest renovations, Amon G. Carter stadium now has a seating capacity of 45,000. It is a loud and joyous environment, and the student-athletes on the playing field are surrounded by admiring and supportive fans, all connected in various ways to the TCU community.

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The fan experience has been improved with upgraded and new concession stands for swifter access and reduced waiting times; newly-implemented elevators and escalators better facilitate stadium accessibility and crowd flow; men's and women's restrooms have been both upgraded and added; suites, club seating, and lounges

are also now available on the west side of the stadium. A newly added press box allows for more comfortable working quarters for those reporting on the games, as well. Throughout the Amon G. Carter stadium is an aesthetic of Southwestern art deco, and this extends to the new suites and lounges. Also integrated into the stadium are the

University colors of purple and white, which adorn stadium signage and other brand-related graphics.

That the north concourse also mirrors the south concourse creates a unified visual experience for fans, one no doubt enhanced by their ability to see the field while walking through either concourse.

Conditioning with Improved Practice Fields

As a figurative extension of the Amon G. Carter Stadium, the practice fields of TCU have also been enhanced, and with the foremost goal of better preparing student-athletes for gameday.

Two practice fields now use a natural turf, which is a version of Bermuda grass designed to endure the Fort Worth weather. The appearance of each are akin to that of a manicured putting green. The new practice fields also include a synthetic turf area with blocking sleds, which protect the natural grass from being torn up and turning into mud.

The biggest improvements have targeted past drainage problems, in which the practice fields have struggled to drain following heavy rain. The new fields include layers of gravel and sand that allow for rainwater to drain into a massive drainage system.

Student-athletes can now practice on a relatively dry field not 30 minutes following a storm. This alleviates any concern about practicing outside, and coaches fully understand the gameday value of their players adapting to the harsh Texas sun.

Ambitious Enhancements to Athletic Centers

Across the country, private universities and colleges are transforming their athletic centers with ambitious and innovative enhancements.

Not only are institutions such as Vanderbilt, Grinnell, and TCU doing everything possible to better prepare student-athletes for the rigors of competitive sports, but they are also vastly improving gameday experiences for fans.

Collegiate sports cast a light on the exceptional talents of student-athletes, all the while unifying communities that celebrate the joy of simply being together, and in the hope, perhaps, of witnessing the miraculous.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PUPN staff writer Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature

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