



The Sports Mentorship Academy

Combining Sports, Study, and Service to Create Successful Futures



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Andre Crockett

Executive Director, Sports Mentorship Academy

l to r: Will Ruffin, James Robertson, Andre Crockett

Studies show that when young people participate in physical education and sports, they not only gain health benefits, they also learn about honesty, fairness, respect, teamwork, and following rules. Sports-based programs for youth even have educational benefits—increasing academic performance, attendance, and the desire to succeed (sportanddev.org).

While working for Olmsted County, Andre Crockett became aware of the pressing need for a local sports-based program for youth. He asked his supervisor what could be done and was told it would take time to develop a program through the normal channels—up to five years. “These kids just couldn’t wait five years,” he says. Sensing the urgency, Crockett started the program on his own. In 2009, the Sports Mentorship Academy was born—and Crockett became its executive director, while maintaining his regular job.

Basketball, football, and baseball are the three sports students from grades K-8 are exposed to during their time with the Sports Mentorship Academy. Twice a week, depending on the time of year, staff teaches one of the sports. Rules, fundamentals, strategy, and teamwork are discussed, and each sport has a competitive league and tournaments. The program’s high school students participate in a separate group called Next Level, which allows for athletes of certain ages or abilities to compete on a more competitive playing field. Some engage in athletics for Mayo,

Century, and John Marshall high schools. Many have older siblings who were once part of the Sports Mentorship Academy but now participate in college athletics.

Familiarization with college is an important part of the program. In partnership with St. Mary’s University, Winona State, the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, and the Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC), the Sports Mentorship Academy offers sports tours for students, allowing them to visit colleges and get used to the college environment. “We want them to envision going to college, and the best way to do that is to show them what it’s really like,” says Crockett. Students also tour local businesses. Exposing the youth to many avenues for success is critical in planting the seeds of success in their minds.

Success wasn’t built on athletics alone, however. The academy has a study-hall component staffed by area teachers and college students who volunteer their time after school throughout the year. Will Ruffin, a teacher in the Rochester Public Schools, for example, works with students during the study hall portion of their afternoon with the academy. Ruffin helps them develop study, time management, homework completion, and test preparation skills. He checks each student’s Skyward profile for attendance and to ensure his or her grades are on track for the established 2.5 GPA goal. The students also engage in small work-study groups and have the opportunity to read quietly.

To ensure youth success and connection within the community, the Sports Mentorship Academy goes a step beyond sports and academics. All academy youth participate in a service-learning project, an opportunity to give back to the community and learn leadership skills outside of a sports environment. Cleaning schools, picking up trash at parks, and working at food banks, like Channel One, are just a few examples of these projects. Integrating students into the community and instilling a sense of accomplishment helps strengthen the academy's goals and message by teaching them another path to character traits that can be gained through commitment and perseverance.

Crockett knows, firsthand, the impact sports have on youth. Originally from Baltimore, he was a successful athlete at Northwestern High School—scoring more than 2,000 points in his basketball career. As a result, he was heavily recruited by major Division I universities. Unfortunately, his SAT scores were not high enough to get into those schools. Instead, he attended Rochester Community College (now RCTC) where he played basketball. He later graduated from Winona State University and began training others who were interested in mentoring youth. "Basketball saved my life," says Crockett. Not being academically eligible to accept a college scholarship drove him to build an organization where athletics become the basis for teaching academic success. "I wanted to give these kids an opportunity to succeed when they don't feel like they have a chance," says Crockett.

Over the past five years, Crockett has worked hard to develop the Sports Mentorship Academy and build relationships that foster its growth. RCTC, Rochester Public Schools, the United Way, and

Mayo Clinic believe in the Sports Mentorship Academy's mission and have dedicated resources to aid Crockett in making his vision a reality. "We don't turn kids away if they are experiencing trouble in their lives," says James Robertson, program director and logistics coordinator. "We want these kids to not only stay active and occupied outside of school hours but to learn that all things are possible through dedication and hard work. The vast majority of these kids do not have a father at home; we try to give them the direction and guidance that kids need."

The Sports Mentorship Academy continues to grow and expand. With a small staff, it is difficult to meet the needs of all students. Currently, having enough transportation to and from the after school locations is an issue. In addition, because students spend multiple hours with the volunteers after school, there is a need to keep them nourished and energized to succeed. "Healthy snack foods are always a need for our kids," says Robertson. "Andre has been very generous when needed and dipped into his own finances to make sure the kids have something to eat after school. It would be great if we had the funding so he didn't need to do that."

The Sports Mentorship Academy recently expanded to Winona, and they have been asked to bring a chapter to St. Paul as well. Crockett and his staff are pleased with the response, and are excited to serve more youth. "We have a great melting pot of kids here—African-American, Latino, bi-racial," he says. "We have kids from different backgrounds, and it's great to get them all in the same environment, having fun together, and learning. That's what this is all about."

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