March 21, 2013 | By Erika Johnson
Athletics

Halftime Heroes

Athletic Initiative program connects underserved kids with UC San Diego basketball team role models



The kids were overjoyed at the opportunity to interact one on one with the star athletes. Photos by Erika Johnson

During a recent home game, members of the UC San Diego men's and women's basketball teams shared high-fives and smiles with a group of newfound young fans who aspire to one day grow up and be just like them.

The kids are participating in Athletic Initiative, a non-profit program designed to provide a healthy outlet for at-risk youth through active involvement in sports. Principles of determination, integrity and citizenship are integrated into fun and enriching activities that align kids on a path towards growth and ambition. UC San Diego Athletics began a

partnership with the program in December 2012 to supply free tickets to several basketball games to more than 300 children and their families, with a chance to meet the players after each game.

"We want to prepare and motivate youth to strive to be open to positive experiences and new opportunities," said Rich Curry, co-director of Athletic Initiative and a UC San Diego staff member. "Through team sports, campus tours and community events, we seek to instill pride in one's community, school, family, city and self."

The program was started in 2011 by Rich and April Curry, both of whom have a history of playing and coaching sports coupled with a strong desire to positively influence the lives of disadvantaged San Diego youth. Their program is run entirely by parents and community volunteers who maintain their own full-time jobs; Rich Curry works in UC San Diego's Transportation Services and April Curry teaches physical education at Old Town Academy Charter School. Together, they have generated partnerships with local community recreation centers and schools to connect youth with athlete role models.



Kids and families who are part of the Athletic Initiative program received free tickets to several UC San Diego men's and women's basketball games. The kids sat in the front row on the edge of their seats, captivated by the players.

"It is no secret that there is a lack of programs dedicated to impacting the perceptions and lives of kids that live in the most volatile areas within San Diego," said Curry. "Our goal is to facilitate a broadening of horizons for youth that would otherwise be neglected."

Their program is offered at low or no cost to participants, who range from 3 to 18 years old. In coordination with local organizations such as the YMCA and Elite Basketball Organization, participants have the chance to improve their athletic skills and fitness levels by playing basketball, baseball, soccer and other sports. Their athletic development is augmented by ideas of teamwork, sportsmanship and fair play, which contribute to their formation as responsible young adults. The likelihood of delinquency and pursuit of negative influences lessen and are transformed into individual pride and personal wellness.

At UC San Diego basketball games, the kids from Athletic Initiative have the chance to shoot 3-pointers and participate in an agility obstacle course during halftime before heading back to talk with the team players. During these conversations, emphasis is placed on the importance of academic achievement in the role of athletic success. In 2012, UC San Diego student-athletes were ranked first for academic strength and athletic prowess among Division II colleges and ninth overall by the National Collegiate Scouting Association. Their accomplishment testifies to what is possible through hard work and dedication, an important lesson to the impressionable youth.

"We offer opportunities for local youth to meet with student athletes and coaches who provide insight into the rewards of working hard and achieving success both in class and on the court," said Nick Feller, associate athletic director at UC San Diego. "These experiences are designed to offer the kids a positive view of college and athletics and motivate them to pursue higher education."

Meeting the players face to face was definitely the icing on the cake for the kids. While many were on the edge of their seats during the game, captivated by the athletes, their excitement peaked as they approached the players for autographs and questions afterward. Zipping from one table to another, it was evident the kids thought the world of these players.

In addition to serving as examples of success on the court, the student athletes also promote anti-bullying. The UC



During halftime, the kids had the opportunity to shoot three pointers on the court.

San Diego men's and women's basketball teams were the first in the county to sign pledges in support of Athletes and Coaches Against Bullying, a program that increases awareness and provides solutions to stop bullying from happening.

"The pledge teaches the kids the importance of showing respect to friends, classmates and athletic opponents," said Feller. "It reinforces that they need to step up and say something if they see someone being bullied."

UC San Diego Athletics and Athletic Initiative have plans to expand their partnership in the spring season to include baseball and softball. Currently, Athletic Initiative is working to resurrect the Reviving Baseball in the Inner Cities (RBI) program, which was started in 1989 by former player and scout John Young. Through these affiliations, there will be more opportunities to engage youth with different athletic interests and to continue to develop alliances with local universities.

"It has been a great collaboration thus far, and we are looking forward to being able to expand the program to additional youth, offering opportunities to set goals of attending a great university and participate in athletics," said Feller.

For those interested in learning more or participating in the program, please visit the Athletic Initiative website.

Want to keep up with UC San Diego news and events?
Subscribe to This Week @ UCSD. It's free!