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Top scholar-athlete heading to Europe

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Rob Drapala was attracted to SFU five years ago partly because of its dual indoor and outdoor track & field programs and its world-class running track.

But then, any track would have been an improvement on the facilities back home in tiny Armstrong, B.C., population 4,531.

'There's no track at all there,' chuckles SFU's top scholar-athlete for 2007 and 2008, who graduates in June with an honours B.

Sc. in molecular biology and business administration and a near-perfect 4.01 cumulative grade point average.

'We trained on an old grass soccer field,' he says 'and for competitions we had a communal box of different-sized track shoes dating back to the '70s to choose from.'

Such humble beginnings didn't stop Drapala from becoming captain of the Clan men's track & field team, a seven-time National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics All-American and the first SFU athlete ever to achieve All-American status in the 4x100-, 4x400- and 4x800-metre relays.

He also competed in the 100-, 200-, 400-, 600- and 800-metre sprints - a remarkable eight different events altogether and just one of the reasons he was voted his team's most inspirational athlete in 2007 and 2008.

But Drapala has been equally inspirational off the track as director of the Academics First program, teaching new SFU athletes critical learning and time-management strategies to balance training and coursework.

'It's been the key to my success at university,' he says. 'Running and working out 20 hours a week is like holding down a half-time job. To fit in my studies and finish in five years including work co-ops took a lot, but with time management I found it doable.'

Doable indeed. In addition to athletic honours, Drapala racked up nine major awards and scholarships and participated in six publications and presentations along the way.

His next stop, pending funding, is a master's degree in integrated immunology at Oxford, followed by a career in cancer medicine. Or he may bum around Europe for the summer and then start a new business.

Either way, whatever Drapala takes a run at he usually finishes well.

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