We should do more than point fingers and laugh at 'dumb jocks'

A CNN report raises questions about college athletes' grades. The reality is even scholar-athletes struggle with all the demands.

In 2005, I was a senior in high school. ESPN ranked me as the top high school football prospect in the US, and I was inundated with scholarship offer letters to universities. Quickly, I sorted through the options. I landed at Florida State University. For those who knew me – a Bill Bradley inspired, Fiddler on The Roof singing, medical school aspiring kid – there was a lot of surprise about my choice. That Florida State University, some asked. It was another reminder of the perception many people have of state schools and, especially, football players at large universities.

I chose FSU because, frankly, I saw student-athletes there maximizing their intellectual capital, accessing available resources and imprinting their altruistic presence on the community all while achieving on the field. It was the exact opposite of the "dumb jock" stereotypes.
For instance, let’s look at Garrett Johnson. I met him on my recruiting visit to FSU. He was the Student Athlete Advisory Council president. He was an aide to then Florida Governor Jeb Bush. He did humanitarian work in Haiti. He was a Rhodes Scholar and a national champion shot putter. Garrett was the kind of leader and scholar I wanted to be – on and off the field – and he affirmed for me my dreams could launch at FSU. I wish we heard more about these athletes.

It's easy to buy into this ideology that most college student-athletes are dumb, can't read and are getting pushed through the system with minimal long-term benefit to them. CNN re-visited the topic this month in a series of stories with headlines like "Some college athletes play like adults, read like 5th-graders".

I have been a part of a top college football team, and the truth is it's quite challenging to excel in your studies while managing the heavy demands of college sports. You are fatigued and burdened. You feel stressed and pressured. The typical in-season football day starts with early classes. Then you must find time to lift and eat before 1:45pm meetings. You finish meetings and head straight to practice, which ends around 5:45pm. Once you shower, eat and watch film, the clock reads 7pm. Study hall lasts one hour and then you may go home to either watch more film, invest more individual academic study time or socialize. The day ends around 11pm. I, someone who "supposedly" had much mental bandwidth, even had to take the minimum credit hours (12) during the season because focusing on my football craft while studying deoxyribonucleic acid was too taxing. So I applaud said unsung student-athletes for being champions in the classroom, which leads to being champions in life. I think many smart people would struggle to balance the time commitments and demands of a NCAA Division 1 sports program alongside their academics.

But for those student-athletes whose superhuman-ness stops at the edge of the field and does not carry over into the classroom, we ought not to point fingers and laugh. We ought not to ban them from entrance into universities. All that does is stop any possible exposure to higher learning this person may ever experience.

It's easy to talk about the "moral issues" of admitting underprepared student-athletes to colleges. However, it is interesting to note that there were no articles about the athletes coming from broken homes, failed schools and growing up in a culture where sports is viewed as their only way out. Frankly, the fact that a student in a bad environment turned to sports and tried to better himself speaks to that person's commitment and drive to be more.

Instead of just bashing student-athletes, here's what we could do: explore the interests of these student-athletes who supposedly only read at a 4th-grade level. If Whitney likes football, ask him why he does. If his answer is because he can make money, then place him in a curriculum that focuses on monies earned/managed/invested through sports. If Beverly likes basketball because she loves seeing her family's reaction to her game, then place her in a curriculum that speaks to family development. I believe Whitney and Beverly, once illiterate, will now engage their minds more in studies that appeal to their genuine interests. They love their sport so find the point of germination within that sport that may sprout a career beyond the playing field.
I cringed while reading the discouraging anecdotes and alarming statistics of under-achieving student-athletes in CNN's story. We've all fallen short of meaningful service and assistance to these academically wayward student-athletes. I've been asking myself what more I can do to encourage the next generation.

What gives me hope is the fact that men and women like Garrett Johnson have blazed the path for us to walk proudly towards our dreams past athletics. I loved my time as a college and NFL football player, but I am equally proud of my time here in medical school and my future career as a doctor. The precedent has been set. Success can be had on the field and in the classroom. Now it is just up to all of us to make sure the "least of these" can walk with us as well.