2024
Lysle “Spike” Garnish Scholar-Athlete Awards

Saturday, October 5, 2024

The 2024 Garnish Scholar-Athlete Awards

From the Director's Chair: George VanderZwaag Executive Director of Athletics

Today we recognize 10 of our senior students as Garnish Scholars. The Garnish Program was created in honor of Lysle "Spike" Garnish, coach and mentor to many Rochester students from 1930 to 1948. He became a trainer and assistant basketball coach in 1931. He was named an assistant baseball coach in 1932. Spike was an assistant football coach from 1945-48.

The Friends of Rochester Athletics, through an alumni committee, reviews nominations of students from our varsity teams who have achieved at a high level in both their athletic and academic pursuits through their junior year. From these nominees, a small number are selected as Garnish Scholars.

Periodically, the Garnish Memorial Citation is given to a graduate, faculty member, or a staff member for dedication and contributions to the intercollegiate athletic program.

These students represent the ideal of the scholar-athlete. They lead our teams on the field of play, while doing outstanding work in the classroom. I am continually inspired by what our students are able to achieve when given the opportunities at a great institution like Rochester. What we know about the students that we recruit is that they set high goals for themselves inside and outside the classroom. What we learn from our Garnish Scholars, and reaffirm today, is that Rochester students are able to demonstrate educational excellence through an outstanding combination of athletic and academic achievement.

The Garnish Committee is proud to present to you these exemplary University of Rochester undergraduates and the Friends of Rochester Athletics continues to remind us of the values of this institution through the Garnish Program.

2023 Garnish honorees (L-R): Luke Wilson, Abby Gress, Mara Heppard, Kate Isaac, Madeleine LaChance, Santino Lupica-Tondo, Sarah Martin, Nolan Sparks, Kerry Wang, Matt Wiele.

CREDITS: The 2024 Garnish winner interviews were conducted by Dennis O'Donnell. Program arranged by Matthew Then, Athletic Communications Intern.

Jeremiah Anandarajah

Men's Soccer

HOMETOWN: Pittsford, NY MAJOR: Computational Biology

You played a total of 1,619 minutes in 18 matches last season, more than 89 minutes a match and the most on the team for field players. How exhausting was that?
It was pretty exhausting, but it was definitely worth the grind. The team had a great season last year, and it felt amazing to be a player that my coaches and teammates could consistently rely on throughout the season.

In the last two years, the defense posted 12 shutouts and held 27 opponents to a goal or less in 32 matches. What's the key to such a strong defense?
We have some great individual players in our backline and in goal, which has helped us keep a strong defensive record, but more importantly, our backline works very well as a unit due to our strong connections both on and off the field, making it very difficult to break us down.

Have you always been a defender – in high school, with club teams, and at Rochester? What makes it attractive?
Funny enough, I actually played most of my career as an attacker and only switched to defender during my sophomore year of high school. The most attractive thing about defense for me is the importance of all the blocks and tackles we make, as we are the last line of defense before the goal. I am also a big advocate for the saying, "Attack wins games, defense wins championships."

Club teams travel a great deal to play in tournaments. Who did you play for and where are some of the places you played?
I played for Global Premier Soccer, and we traveled all over the country to places such as Frisco, TX; Orlando, FL; Canton, OH; and Chicago, IL. There was also one summer when I got the chance to travel with the team to Northern Ireland to play in a tournament.

You have been named to the UAA All-Academic Team for two years, as well as the Academic All-District Team selected by the College Sports Communicators (formerly CoSIDA). How do you organize your academic work?
I usually make a schedule at the beginning of each week with all the work I need to get done, which helps me stay ahead of my work and allows me to be fully focused on my academics and soccer without them interfering with one another.

What projects does the UR Men's Soccer Service Committee undertake?
Some projects that we do annually include pooling money together as a team to buy a bunch of gifts and necessities that we can give to families in need within Rochester. We also work with the Flower City Soccer League to help coach and support the underprivileged youth in the city.

You are a member of the UR Globe Med Society. How large is that group and what do the members do?
UR Globe Med is a relatively large group with about 58 members. There are multiple committees within the club, all working towards the overall goal of spreading global health awareness throughout campus and the city of Rochester.

You worked at Dr. Woeller's laboratory in the Flaum Eye Institute at the UR Medical Center. Can you tell us some of the work you performed (in layman's terms).
The main goal of my work in Dr. Woeller's lab was to research the various molecular and cellular pathways involved in the eye's response to injuries in order to develop treatments that could help resolve tissue damage or vision loss.

One of your projects was researching thyroid eye disease. What was involved in the research? How prevalent is thyroid eye disease?
For my research, I worked to find potential target pathways that could help treat or even cure thyroid eye disease by using a computer program called Cytoscape, which allowed us to map out many of the known molecular and cellular pathways. Thyroid eye disease is very rare, but it is one of the most studied eye diseases in the world.

Which courses did you take that prepared you for the work in Dr. Woeller's lab?
I would say two of the classes that helped me get ready for the lab work were physiology and biochemistry. I felt that physiology gave me a solid foundation in understanding the human body and all its different systems, while biochemistry prepared me very well for a lot of the different experiments I had to perform in Dr. Woeller's lab.

Is there an easy way to describe your major of Computational Biology?
Whenever people ask me about it, the easy answer that I give them is that computational biology is computer science, data science, and biology combined into one major.

Which courses will you take in the fall semester that are very appealing?
One class I am excited for is Applied Genomics because it is a growing field and is relevant to a lot of the work that I am interested in.

Megan Bell

Women's Track and Field

HOMETOWN: Wynantskill, NY MAJOR: Biomedical Engineering

Between the 4x400 meter relay and the 800 meter run in the last two years, you have six First Team All-America honors and consecutive Division III national championships (4x400 indoors). Have you had a chance to reflect on your accomplishments while relaxing (hopefully) this summer?
Because the season is so busy, it can be difficult to recognize and take in the success and improvement I am having in the moment, so I have been reflecting on my accomplishments a lot this summer. My success on the track has been so rewarding and continuously improving is such an amazing feeling, but what is even better is having success as a team. Winning two national championship relays and helping my team come in fourth at the national championship meet have been some of the best experiences of my track career and I am so fortunate to have had such amazing teammates by my side. Seeing my hard work pay off on the track has been very fulfilling, and I am so excited to keep working towards my goals this next season.

In 2023, UR won the indoor 4x400 and set a national record in the process. That spring, the team finished second in the outdoor 4x400. You won the indoor 4x400 again in 2024. What was the mood around the team when you arrived in Myrtle Beach, SC last spring for outdoor nationals?
Being the defending champions can create a little bit of a target on your back and increase the pressure the team is feeling going into a national meet, but as a team we always try to make a point to be grateful for making it to another national meet and soak up all the fun experiences that come along with that. Our team is so supportive of each other, and we were all prepared to work hard and run with our hearts. We also had 3 seniors on the trip, so we were really enjoying some of our last moments together as teammates.

The indoor races are run in a controlled environment. As long as the weather is not an interference, what challenges does the outdoor race have that you don't encounter at indoor nationals?
When the weather cooperates, outdoor track is more suited to my strengths as a runner. The larger track decreases the importance of getting out the fastest and gives runners more space on the track. However, the weather can definitely pose a big challenge in outdoor races. When you are trying to qualify for larger meets by getting a certain mark or time, it can feel like there are fewer chances to perform at your best when the weather isn't working to your favor (which it rarely is during spring in Rochester). We also faced some challenges with the weather in Myrtle Beach as we had multiple delays because of storms on the last day of competition. I think I started my warmup three times before I actually got to race the 800 and I was expecting to have more time between the 800 and 4x400 finals but the schedule was condensed due to the delays. My mindset was really important during this to stay focused on what was ahead of me and be flexible with the schedule changes.

You ran the 'anchor' (fourth) leg in each of the 4x400s at nationals this year. As you step into your lane awaiting the handoff, what's going through your mind?
Being the anchor can be a little nerve wracking at times, but trusting in my teammates to put me in a good position helps to ease the nerves. Usually, I am thinking about the position our team is in and what I need to do to help us win the race, whether that means catching up to someone in front of me or maintaining a lead. I prepare myself to run my heart out and I cheer on my teammate who is handing off to me.

Speed can't be 'taught', can it? What do the coaches design for the athletes in practice sessions?
Every athlete certainly comes in with a level of "natural talent" but working hard in practice and focusing on the little things outside of practice are key to success on the track. Our coaches have us work on our running technique, starts, strength, explosiveness, and so many other aspects of our events to nail down technique and increase our fitness to prepare us for success.

Last summer, you did a research fellowship with the National Science Foundation. What did the research involve?
I took part in a Research Experience for Undergraduates at Cleveland State University. I researched indications of stability for balance exercises using data from motion analysis. I used the knowledge I have gained from my Biomedical Engineering courses at UofR and learned so much in the process.

You are majoring in Biomedical Engineering. Where is your focus in that specialty? Where do you hope it will lead you when your work is finished on the River Campus?
My focus is in Biomechanics. I am planning on continuing my education by completing a master's degree and then I hope to create medical devices.

When do you find time to do your research work? Between indoor and outdoor track, that occupies the spring semester.
My coursework and track keep me very busy in the spring semester, but I have been able to find amazing opportunities to get involved in research and industry internships during the summer throughout my time at Rochester and those experiences have taught me so much.

You're a teaching assistant in Physics and Biomedical Engineering. Does work in either of those courses cross over into the other?
The basics of Biomedical Engineering are rooted in physics, so there is a lot of overlap. Having a good understanding of general physics is key to success in Biomedical Engineering, especially in the Biomechanics concentration, and having the opportunity to be a TA for physics and Biomedical Engineering courses has strengthened my understanding of concepts I have learned in the past.

Which classes are you looking forward to in the fall semester?
I am excited for my senior design course because I feel it is the culmination of all of my engineering coursework and will give me the opportunity to showcase what I have learned during my time at UofR. I am also looking forward to Introduction to Neuroengineering; this is a totally new topic for me and something I am very interested in.

Bryce Berkhof

Men's Swimming & Diving

HOMETOWN: Henrietta, NY MAJOR: Computer Science

Your name and times are prevalent in the Rochester Men's Swimming record book. It appears for the 200 yard freestyle and goes all the way up to the longest race – the 1,650 yard freestyle. How many other strokes do you swim?
I consider myself a freestyle specialist, within freestyle I swim sprint, mid-distance, and distance events at our championship meet and representing UofR in many relays on the freestyle leg. Outside of freestyle I have only swam the 200 IM once.

What's the key to succeeding in a race like the 1,650? Is endurance the main factor?
I believe the most important factor in a distance race like the mile is staying mentally sharp. Swimming is a sport where you are locked into your lane and most noise is cancelled out, therefore in the mile - a race taking about 16 minutes - you must be engaged and focused on being consistent and motivated.

How did you get started swimming such a long event?
Ironically, I never swam the mile before attending the University of Rochester. I began swimming the event based on my capabilities in the 500 free and the possibility of scoring points during our mid-season Bomber Invitational meet in Ithaca and [at the] UAA Championships. Since then, I have dropped time every year and have settled into my role as a distance swimmer.

It's 66 'laps' in the 25-yard pool at the Goergen Athletic Center. Your teammates have adjustable signs they hold in the water so you know how many laps are left. When do you start digesting the numbers in front of you so you know where you stand?
Paying attention to your counter is something that varies from a lot of swimmers. Personally, I like to break the event up in my head by 500's. The first 20 laps I trust my training and like to tune out and hit my pace. After the counter switches to the laps in the 20's I begin to digest the numbers and adjust my speed depending on indication from coaches.

You're up to the challenge. You scored team points in the 1,650 at the UAA Championships last season and finished third overall in the 1,650 at the Bomber Invitational at Ithaca College. You are a member of the school-record 800 freestyle relay. For three years, you've scored in the distance race at Ithaca. How do you train for an event like that?
Training for distance swimming is something that is unique. We spend a lot of time engaged on hitting 50 pace down to the hundredth and racking up yards during a practice. There are lots of ways to train for distance, but I have a great time and results working under [UR assistant] coach Mike [Oliver].

Divers say they have some camaraderie among themselves. They want to win, but they also want the others to do well. Does the same principle pertain to the distance swimmers – the regional foes and the UAA opponents?
That is an interesting question, there are not many swimmers who do the main distance events and throughout the years I've gotten to know those who swim similar events to me. I typically like to hope the swimmers besides me are swimming fast and have a good swim, so it pushes me to beat them and thus a better time for myself. Within a distance event there are lots of shifts in positions and that can be attributed to different racing plans.

You're standing on the starting block for the 1,650. What's going through your mind?
I like to visualize my events behind the starting blocks before I even step up onto the starting blocks, so once I get up there I try to tune out and focus on performing well. Usually, this means reminding myself of small tweaks I need to focus on like stroke rate and breakouts coming off of turns. Something that is important is managing adrenaline and taking advantage of easy speed early in the race.

You will be a captain for the second time when the 2024-25 season arrives. What duties do you have?
As a captain of the swim team I have the duties of assisting both the coaches and my teammates. This could mean helping assist with recruiting weekends, or something like setting up a team get together. It also means working with our other great captains.

When did you begin swimming competitively?
I began swimming competitively when I was 11 years old and I followed in the footsteps of my older sister who actually is an alum of University of Rochester Swimming and Diving.

You are majoring in computer science. Have you done any internships either on-or-off-campus tied to the major?
I am fresh coming off an internship with Resideo Technologies as a Software Engineering intern and I had a great experience relocating to Minneapolis this summer. I worked as a Full Stack Engineer in a Sprint environment.

Which courses are you looking forward to in the Fall semester?
I am looking forward to all my courses this semester, trying to appreciate my final year in college. But particularly I am looking forward to my course CSC254 – Programming Language Design and Implementation.

Happy Chane

Football

HOMETOWN: Alpharetta, GA MAJOR: Biomedical Engineering

You had a dynamic season last year as a starting linebacker – ranked third among tacklers in the Liberty League and in the top-100 in Division III. What made everything click?
My confidence in my faith played the biggest role in the success I had this past year. I already knew that I was physically able to compete with anyone in the country, but as I got closer to God, I felt my confidence explode.

Coach Martinovich praised your leadership skills. That starts off the field, doesn't it – weight room, meetings, practice, etc.?
Absolutely, It's easy to be a leader on the field on game day, but the off-the-field work that is put in [during] the off-season is how I was able to hone my leadership skills. I also met with coach Marty every other Thursday to discuss different aspects of leadership that are relevant to life and not just football.

Is there more of an emphasis on leadership for you this year since you are a senior and will be a three-year starter?
This preseason, Coach Marty and Coach Sapp emphasized that going from good to great is not a miracle but rather a culmination of progress. So, the emphasis on leadership this year is not suddenly thrust on me but rather a process that is now being (for a lack of better terms) "recognized". So, in short, the emphasis remains constant.

When you arrived as a first-year player for 2021, who were the leaders and what did they do for the newcomers?
I looked up to Caden Cole [Garnish winner], Adam Huewe, and Nick Annechino [Garnish winner]. They each showed me different aspects of what it means to be a successful college student-athlete. Nick-Academics, Caden-Athletics, Adam-Toughness.

Here's the obvious question: who gave you the nickname 'Happy'?
Hahahah, my first name is Yididya, which translates to "Loved by God." But when I was first introduced to the world, before I opened my eyes, my parents saw me smile, noticed my dimples, and called me Happy. So I've always had that nickname.

Is there much talk across the line before the ball is snapped?
Oh, plenty. I talk a lot pre-snap to make sure that the defense has the right calls and checks, but on top of that, I love that I can talk to the offense and try to get them off their game with a little banter, or as we say down South, jonin'. Some of my best football memories come from me and the quarterback, RB, or O-Linemen jonin' pre-snap.

You are majoring in Biomedical Engineering. That's a wide field. Where are you focusing your studies?
My track in BME focuses on the mechanical aspect of BME. I enjoy working on and designing prosthetics that can improve the quality of life of patients.

Where have you done your internships – and what did you do at those places?
I was an intern for the Emergency Department Research Assistant (EDRA) program. This program screens emergency department patients at Strong Memorial hospital to see if they are eligible for ongoing research at the University.

What did you like at the internship?
This gave me an opportunity to interact with a variety of patients, and health care providers to help better society through research.

When you were playing at Mount Pisgah Christian in Georgia, what made the University attractive as a place to study medicine and a place to play football?
The coaches were a big factor in my decision, and they made me feel like they wanted me up here. The open curriculum was also attractive to me because I was an individual who was not 100% set on what I wanted to do with my life as an 18-year-old. LOL, who is? But the biggest reason was that I felt at peace in Rochester.

Which courses are you looking forward to studying this semester?
I'm excited to study, Hip Hop and Religion, being that I have interests in both fields.

Are you planning on medical school next year?
God willing, I'll be taking a gap year to go back home to Georgia and spend time with my younger siblings, Elim and Praise, before I enroll, but Med School is the end goal.

Colby Cruser

Baseball

HOMETOWN: Littleton, CO MAJOR: Political Science

When you arrived at Rochester in the Fall of 2021, did you come in with the intention of being a two-way player?
I was recruited solely as a pitcher, but on my visit, Coach Reina told me that I would have the opportunity to hit and play the field my first fall with the team. I had the belief that I had the potential of succeeding at both, but it wasn't a guarantee that I would be a two-way when the spring started. I was lucky enough to show enough potential from both sides my first fall that I was allowed to two-way going forward!

You had a solid first year. D3Baseball named you the regional Rookie of the Year in 2022 and accorded you Second Team All-Region honors. Did you have to make any adjustments from your career in Littleton, CO?
My biggest adjustment coming from home and high school baseball specifically was transitioning into a starting role as a pitcher. In high school, I spent four years as a reliever, never throwing more than 30-40 pitches in an outing. However, my success in the fall led to opportunities as a starting pitcher, which required me to improve my arm conditioning and strength to meet the demands of starting games, which brings more pitches per outing and a greater physical toll on my body.

Consistency marked your game in 2022 (.298) and 2023 (.294). You made a terrific jump last season, hitting .443, the second-highest batting average in a season in school history. You earned Second Team All-Liberty League honors and were second in the batting race. What accounted for the difference?
My first two seasons I started off hot at the plate, especially during our spring break trip, but hit slumps as we came home and began conference play. I knew my biggest adjustment at the plate was going to be maintaining consistency and knowing my swing to avoid any long-term slumps while hitting. I found that finding a constant routine in practice and in games enabled me to do so, allowing myself to carry success throughout the whole season.

Will the coaches tell you ahead of time if they might bring you into a game as a reliever, especially if you are starting the game as a field player?
As a reliever, I, as well as my teammates, understand that is that our role is to always be ready. Prior to games, Coach Reina will tell all of us who is available to pitch that day based on who has thrown already in recent days, but if I start the game in the field I won't know when exactly I will pitch, if at all, until I get sent to the bullpen to warm up.

Is that a special challenge in your pre-game prep, knowing you might be on the mound at some point?
Over time it can certainly be an adjustment, but when I transitioned from a starting pitching role this past season to a relief role midway through the season, it felt very similar to the role I played in high school, so taking my warmup routine seriously prior to hitting kept me ready. Utilizing resistance bands, weighted balls, and taking my time in catch play put my arm in a position to be ready whenever I am needed.

Were you a two-way player at Chatfield High School in Colorado?
I was a two-way player for my high school team, however I typically played outfield when I was in the field, rather than first base or designated hitter like I do at Rochester. My high school team had a much greater need for outfielders, which is why I spent more time there rather than at first base.

You were the captain of the Mock Trial Team in high school. When did you set your sights on a career in law?
In high school, I was inclined towards law school to follow in the footsteps of my mom and grandfather, who are also practicing attorneys, however another passion of mine, science, led me to pursue a biology degree my first two years at UR. It wasn't until after the Spring semester of my second year at UR that I realized my true passion was for law, causing me to switch my major to Political Science and pursue a law degree.

When you did a Mock Trial, did you focus on only one branch of the law (i.e. civil as opposed to criminal), or touch on several different aspects?
Our Mock Trial regional and state competitions would switch cases each year, using one per school year that we would receive and try at a competition in the winter time. These cases would rotate, allowing me to participate in both criminal and civil trials during my time in the club, giving our team a look at anything from murder and assault cases to contested will and testaments.

You interned at a law office at home over the summer. What did you do? Were you assigned to one partner or one division? What were the hours like?
This summer, I interned with the Family Violence Unit of the Denver District Attorney's office. Shadowing an investigator in the unit, I was able to participate in witness prep meetings, case strategy discussions, reading of police reports, and I even got to sit in on major trials in Denver District Court. I was at the office three to four full days a week, spending time with the unit that handles cases ranging from domestic violence to child abuse, and even homicides. The unit was comprised of several District Attorneys, Investigators, and Victim Advocates.

What did you like about it?
I loved that the internship was focused on teaching us as interns about what criminal prosecution consists of, providing us with a variety of opportunities in and out of the office. We were even able to access other aspects of law enforcement, from going on a ride along with police to touring the Denver Crime Lab. As interns, we were able to participate in just about anything we wanted, reading reports and even talking to victims and witnesses as a part of meetings in the office. It was also very helpful to watch current DA's practice in court, watching how standard court proceedings follow and learning about relationships with victims and their families.

Which courses have you taken at Rochester that helped you prepare for the internship?
I think that many of my courses at Rochester have provided me with necessary skills that helped in this internship, but one course in particular which I took this past spring was Criminal Procedure and Constitutional Principles with Professor Fiandach. This course helped to explain many aspects of the legal system and criminal statutes which I came into contact with this summer.

Counting the Spring 2024 semester as well as the upcoming Fall semester, is the study of political science more interesting this calendar year because it is a Presidential election year?
I think the upcoming election has certainly provided many topics of discussion in political science classes I have taken. This past fall, I took PSCI 215W, American Elections, with Professor Druckman, a course which gave us the opportunity to look at how elections in our country function, but most importantly spend the start of each class discussing ongoing debates in the political realm. Importantly, this included talking about daily updates regarding the Presidential Primaries which were approaching this last Spring. I think Political Science will always be an important field of study in the political landscape of the US, but especially so with the Presidential election coming up this fall.

Which courses are you looking forward to studying in the Fall?
I'm very excited for INTR 245W, The Politics of Science and Expertise, which will provide a very interesting scope into how science is incorporated into today's politics. I think it should highlight crucial relationships between my studies of science my first two years at UR, as well as what I have now been studying in Political Science since last year. Further, I'm taking a history course to fulfill my major called Gateway to History: Eastern Front, a course which covers the historical significance of the Eastern Front of WWII, a period of history which I have always enjoyed learning about.

Gracie Giannettino

Lacrosse

HOMETOWN: Auburn, NY MAJOR: Political Science and Environmental Studies

You've had a knack as a scorer on the lacrosse pitch: 37 goals in 2022, 30 goals in 2023, and 39 goals in 2024. That's 106 goals, putting you eighth at UR in career goal scoring. When did you develop the scoring prowess?
My trainer at home, John Alberici, has really helped me develop my dodging and scoring abilities over the last 5 years. I work with him over the summer and winter breaks on footwork, speed, spacing, and my stick skills. More importantly though, he has always instilled the mindset that hard work and being a good teammate will allow me to achieve my goals and be the best that I can be. He has helped me gain a lot of confidence, which in turn helps me be a threat on the field.

When you are running towards goal with the ball in your stick, what are you seeing from the opposing defense?
It really depends. No matter what defense a team runs, there will be a weak point. The best way to beat them is by knowing what those weak points are and capitalizing on them. A lot of that knowledge comes from the coaching staff working hard to scout teams and watching film.

What's the defense doing to stop you, particularly with your ability as a passer?
Being a threat in multiple ways, like being a goal scorer and a passer, is the toughest for a defense to stop. It makes it hard for the team to know what you are going to do. If a team knows that I will dodge hard to shoot, they will send a double team to me quickly. But, in that case, it helps to also be a good passer because they left one of my teammates open.

You need a quick trigger to shoot successfully, don't you?
Yes, lacrosse is a very fast-paced sport. And every year, players get faster and stronger, so the windows of opportunity to score get smaller.

When did you begin playing lacrosse? What made it attractive?
I started playing lacrosse in 8th grade, which is late, since I live in a hotbed for the sport. I became interested in lacrosse because all my friends played. I also really liked the team aspect of the sport. It's great to celebrate the highs with them and have their support in the lows.

Rochester defeated 15th-ranked St. John Fisher last year. You scored six goals and were named the Division III Player of the Week by the IWLCA. What do you recall about that game?
The energy going into the Fisher game was great. We had been waiting for an opportunity to prove ourselves and show how much our program has grown over the last few years. I remember how well we played together, everywhere on the field. Our defense would make a huge stop, and then we would use that momentum on the offensive end to score. We also never worried about how close the score was, everyone just relied on their preparation and did their jobs. Our coaching staff also did a great job making in-game adjustments and keeping us calm and collected.

Off the field at Rochester, you founded the Morgan's Message Chapter and served as Vice-President. What does that group do?
The Morgan's Message Foundation was created in memory of Morgan Rodgers, a Duke lacrosse player who sadly ended her own life. The purpose of the Morgan's Message Chapter is to bring awareness and provide resources for student athletes' mental health. All student athletes face pressure, whether from performing on the field or in the classroom, and our goal is to break the stigma that many athletes face, which is feeling like they can't talk about their struggles. We hold meetings and events, like guest speakers, to open the conversation about mental health to ultimately save lives.

In Summer 2023, you were a research assistant for the Auburn Conservation Corporation and in 2024, you were an environmental intern with Brown & Caldwell. What did you do in each position?
Working with the Auburn Conservation Corp, I took temperature readings throughout the city of Auburn in coordination with tree canopy coverage. This work was to show how a lack of trees in underserved areas of the city leads to higher temperatures. The higher temperatures place more stress on the community, and ultimately the goal of the research was to bring awareness to the issue have more trees planted in these areas.

Brown and Caldwell [is] an engineering, consulting, and construction management company that focuses on safeguarding water, maintaining vital infrastructure and restoring habitats to help communities thrive. As an environmental intern, I worked on a variety of water infrastructure projects including wastewater treatment plants and water filtration plants. I assisted with quality control, project management, and health and safety plans during pre-construction and construction phases of projects. I also worked to help municipal clients find grant and loan opportunities available in their respective states to create more affordable financing for their projects.

You were a participant in the team's Strides for Breast Cancer Walk. If people want to be involved with it this year, how do they do it?
The Strides for Breast Cancer Walk is an amazing event that takes place in Rochester. It is very easy to get involved in and the foundation is always looking for more participants. The event is held by the American Cancer Society, and you can donate on their website and take part in a 3-mile walk through downtown Rochester in October. It was a great opportunity for my team and I to raise money for a great cause and give back.

Did you do any internships tied to your Political Science major?
I am a research assistant for Professor Gerald Gamm in the Political Science Department. Our research team studies how bipartisan polarization has increased over the second half of the twentieth century.

You have a double major of Political Science and Environmental Studies. How do they work together?
Political Science and Environmental Studies are very interrelated. Where I think they relate the most is when environmental issues, such as climate change, become political. Things like environmental regulations & laws, clean energy subsidies, fossil fuel taxes, etc. are all examples of politics and environment working together.

Which courses are you looking forward do in the Fall semester?
I am looking forward to taking my senior seminar course with Professor Karen Berger. My first environmental studies course was her intro class, and she was the reason I was interested in making it a major.

Josephine Libby

Women's Tennis

HOMETOWN: Rochester, NY MAJOR: Financial Economics

You carried over your scholastic success (Monroe County Player of the Year) to the UR program as a first year in 2022, reaching the NCAA quarterfinals and earning All-America honors. What were the biggest challenges you found in that initial season?
I found that my biggest challenge in my initial season was learning to deal with the traveling and number of matches and balance that with my academic work. In high school I didn't do a lot of traveling for tennis and the 2022 season involved a lot of away matches. I will also add that using the trainers and navigating the weight room, took some time to get used to.

When the NCAA selected you to compete at nationals in 2022, you defeated opponents from Kenyon College and Claremont Mudd Scripps. You lost to an opponent from Pomona Pitzer. That quarterfinal appearance earned All-America honors. What do you recall about that experience?
I recall being very nervous yet excited during my first appearance at the NCAA's. The format of the tournament was a little different from what I expected. The main differences were [that] the scoring was different and allowed for longer matches and all the matches were chaired, which means that there was an umpire overturning line calls and keeping track of the score. Also, a pleasant surprise was that the tournament providing Powerade, water, and snacks which I took advantage of!

For an in-season match against a regional (or UAA) opponent, you might have some information on your foe ahead of time in terms of their style of play. At nationals, though, you're probably playing someone you haven't seen. Do you have to trust your instincts against that foe – reacting to what they do?
I would say that I must try to trust my instincts in combination with asking my coach what tactics I should use for how I can adopt my game style. Usually if I'm playing a player I don't know, I must balance my instincts as well as what my coach thinks to come up with a strategy.

You were named to the All-UAA team for singles and doubles in all three seasons. It seems like you are facing a nationally-ranked opponent every time you step on the court.
Yes, our season schedule usually allows for me to get chances against several ranked opponents. Doing that makes it easier for me to be ranked in singles/doubles and have a chance at making the NCAA's.

How old were you when you began playing tennis?
I believe I was about 5 when my parents put me in group lessons for tennis where we played on a small court with softer balls.

Which tournaments did you play in as you moved up the junior ranks?
Luckily, there were a lot of local tournaments in Rochester when I was growing up where I could play against opponents with a similar level to me in New York and parts of New Jersey. I also remember making lots of trips to Buffalo, Syracuse, and Cornell University to play tournaments at those facilities.

You earned UAA All-Academic honors as a sophomore and a junior along with All-District honors from the College Sports Communicators. The ITA named you as a Scholar-Athlete for three straight years. How have you wrapped your athletic responsibilities with your academic work to be successful?
Since practices are usually in the evening, I try to tackle my academic responsibilities during the day so that I can get those taken care of early on. I also have a lot of help from teammates/friends that have taken or are taking the same classes as me and I also regularly take advantage of office hours.

Away from the court, you are a teaching assistant for a course in sports economics. What is the focus of that course?
The focus of sports economics at the U of R is mainly looking at the underbelly of how sports functions behind the scenes with how teams are managed, how contracts work, and how race/gender plays a role in sports teams.

Have you done any internships tied to your major? What did you like about them? Will the Actuarial Science Certificate work hand-in-hand with your major of Financial Economics?
I am currently doing an internship at Excellus as an actuarial department intern, and I have really enjoyed getting to work with different programs like SAS and VBA. My major has a lot in common with Actuarial Sciences as they both have a focus on math and financial concepts.

Which courses are you looking forward to studying this year?
I am looking forward to studying behavior economics this upcoming semester as I think it will be interesting to see how people's decisions are influenced.

Alexia Nelms

Volleyball

HOMETOWN: Rochester, NY MAJOR: Psychology and Brain & Cognitive Sciences

You are carrying a double major, have two concentrations in other fields, and play in the toughest volleyball conference in Division III. How are you balancing all of this?
Honestly, sometimes I don't know how I balance it all. I would be lying if I said it wasn't tough. I think what helps me is time management and remembering that I am in control of whatever I put on my plate. I set deadlines for myself but I don't beat myself up if I don't meet them. It's all about balancing them mentally so I can balance them physically. Volleyball is an outlet for me so at the end of the day they all balance each other out.

Let's talk about volleyball. You became UR's primary setter as a sophomore and did well. Last year, you were off to a terrific start until an injury occurred. The setter is not just a 'passer of the ball', are they? Aren't you directing traffic at the net so that your teammates know where the set is going? What else are you doing out there?
Yes, thank you for recognizing it's not just handing the ball off to another player. Our role can be very complicated. A major part of the setting role is deciding what should happen with the ball but there is a lot more that goes into it than people recognize. It's about knowing your teammates and what will make them most successful. It is about understanding the other team and what will force an error. And it is about knowing the team and what kind of energy they need to function as a unit. Sometimes that looks like a pep talk, sometimes that's tough love, and sometimes that's just emotional control to help manage the chaos. The setter controls the pace of the game.

If fans are going to watch what you are doing, what should they be looking for?
Connection with my teammates. Being a setter means knowing my teammates. On the court, we should be in a flow and talking about what worked and what didn't every play. Off the court, we should be reading the other team and game-planning. Ultimately, volleyball is a team sport and we win and lose together so you should be able to see and feel that group energy.

When did you begin playing volleyball?
Middle school, 7th grade. I was playing other sports and thought, why not give volleyball a try? It was love at first kneepad I guess. I started club volleyball, stopped playing the other sports, and now here I am.

Were you attracted to the setter's role right away?
I always say that the setter chose me. No one knows what they are doing in middle school so when I started playing, I played everything. As I played a little more, and developed some more coordination, that was the skill I was a little bit better at than the others. I just wanted to play as much as possible and was willing to do whatever the coaches wanted if it meant more touches. I quickly embraced the role and I never looked back.

In the spring semester in 2023, you studied abroad in Sweden at the Neuroscience of Emotion Lab. What did your work involve?
My program, DIS Stockholm, worked a little bit differently than a traditional lab setting. It was more of a classroom environment where we learned how to build a research study from scratch. My group was tasked with formulating a question, setting up a study to investigate that question, collecting data, and then reporting our findings. As the name suggests, we looked at the effects of emotions on our brain functioning. More specifically, my group looked at how frustration affects attention. We used code to create visual stimuli and eye trackers to collect data from humans. Outside of the lab, we learned all about emotions and what happens in our brain when we think and feel so we could relate that to our research. One of the best parts was that we got to travel and learn outside of the classroom as well. My class went to Paris, France, and had a whole week dedicated to learning about emotions and the senses.

Were there any language challenges, especially when you were not in the lab?
Not really. Almost everyone in the more populated areas of Sweden speaks English as well as Swedish so there were no problems there. I even had the opportunity to take a Swedish class and learn a few phrases to help me find some common ground. There were some times when traveling that were a bit challenging but I was blessed to meet a lot of really understanding and patient people along the way.

Did the lab have other students from the U.S. or from other nations?
Like I said before, this was more of a classroom-style learning experience and so I had students from all across the US studying with me.

Your work had you in two labs tied with Brain & Cognitive Science – a Haptics Lab and Marmolab. In layman's terms, what did you learn in each lab?
Brain and Cognitive Sciences, or BCS, is the study of what happens in the brain when people think and interact with the world around them. In the Haptics lab, I learned about how we use our hands to move and understand objects around us. In the Marmolab, I am learning about how we use vision to track moving objects and how it connects with our hands to grab those objects. In both labs, I got to learn a lot of practical skills that are used to collect data in the BCS field and how to think like a scientist. I learned how to ask critical questions and present my research to other people.

Will your dual degrees work in specific fields after graduation?
There are a variety of areas that use both degrees together and independently. Right now, I am looking heavily into research but who knows where they might take me.

You have concentrations in American Sign Language and Interdisciplinary Science. Where did you generate the interest?
Well, I have always loved learning languages. Throughout my pre-college schooling, I learned Spanish and a little Mandarin so continuing language in college was a no-brainer for me. Living in Rochester also meant that I was exposed to the Deaf community very early. We have such a large population of Deaf individuals here so when deciding what language and culture I wanted to explore further, ASL made the most sense. As far as Interdisciplinary Science goes, coming into college I didn't know what area of science I wanted to go into. I knew I loved science but I didn't want to be limited so soon so I explored a few.

Which courses will you take this fall that you are really looking forward to studying?
This will be my first formal college semester since studying abroad and so I am looking forward to all of my classes. I am taking a lab in Cognitive Neuroscience with a professor whose classes I really enjoy and so I am excited to get some more experience in the field and learn from him. I am no stranger to a lab setting so I can't wait to see what skills and lessons this specific lab can teach me.

Krish Vennam

Men's Tennis

HOMETOWN: Stamford, CT MAJOR: Computational Biology

You play in a tough region. How do you prepare for each match? Do you work on refining your game or working on something to use against the next opponent?
I've found it most beneficial to refine my game during practice. Since we play so many different players, I have found it best to work on myself and get to the top of my game instead of focusing on opponents. I try to reflect on practices or matches to pinpoint what feels off and try to get that aspect of my game as ready as possible. During matches, I shift my focus away from technical fixes and concentrate on figuring out what's working for me, strategizing, and playing to my strengths while exploiting my opponent's weaknesses.

When the regional matches are over, you play in the UAA Championships. That might be the toughest tennis league in Division III. You've got to be at the top of your game all season long, don't you?
The goal is to be at the top of my game by the time the championship rolls around. The [UAA] tournament is always in the back of my mind throughout the season, and it motivates me to keep pushing harder. I think it's important to trust in the training, the matches we've played, and our team as we approach the tournament. There have been times when I didn't feel at my best going into the tournament. It's important to mentally reset and remember all the matches I've played. I know I can hit my peak when it counts. I see the tournament as a chance to really step on the gas and finish the season strong.

Did you start playing tennis on the junior level? How old were you?
I started playing tennis when I was 5. It all began when I was at one of my brother's practices, and I was nagging my dad to leave. One of the coaches noticed and took me to a wall to hit some balls. I spent the first few months just playing against that wall, and from there, the game grew on me. I started playing more and more, eventually competing in tournaments regularly.

What was the most challenging part of the sport for you to master?
My serve has always been the most challenging aspect of my game to master. I dedicated countless hours to hitting thousands of serves, but it remained the one shot that I could never perfect completely. I have learned how to strengthen other parts of my game, like my returns, and fall back on my strengths during close matches. My journey with my serve has shown me that while not every challenge can be overcome perfectly, there's always a way to adapt, improve, and find the best path forward.

Your major is Computational Biology with Psychology as a minor. How do they fit together?
My major in Computational Biology and minor in Psychology actually fit together pretty well. Computational Biology helps me break down complex biological systems by analyzing big data, while Psychology gives me insights into human behavior and mental processes. By combining them, I get a better understanding of how our biology influences behavior and vice versa. These topics have really come together in my research, where both insights have been crucial in analyzing patients.

You worked in the Merigan Lab at the UR Medical Center. What did you do there?
In the Merigan Lab, I focused on exploring the function of various ganglion cells in visual perception to develop an optogenetic approach aimed at restoring vision. In the initial phase, I assessed how different ganglion cells contribute to visual processing. The project then progressed to evaluating the effectiveness of the optogenetic therapy across several visual aspects, including color perception, motion detection, and clarity. I monitored the monkey's visual responses using a precise eye tracker, adjusting the cue contrast based on the monkey's ability to accurately detect light or motion. The data I collected from testing different locations in the monkey's eye was used to perform Weibull regressions to analyze the therapy's effectiveness.

Did you do any other internships besides your time at URMC?
In addition to my time at URMC, I completed two research internships at Columbia and Yale. My grandfather has Parkinson's disease, so I was interested in conducting research on the topic. In my first project at Columbia, I studied brain cell samples from patients with and without tremors, focusing on the role of specific cells like Bergmann glia in regulating brain activity and their potential impact on Parkinson's symptoms. My second project at Yale centered on understanding the progression of early-stage Parkinson's disease by analyzing various factors like speech patterns, motor function, and cognitive abilities.

How did you become involved with UR Globe Med? What do you do?
When I was involved with UR GlobeMed, I focused on raising funds to support healthcare and education for low-income families in India. I did a lot of grassroots fundraising, like selling churros and organizing small events to gather support. I also stayed engaged with the local community through volunteering, like participating in gardening. It was a hands-on experience that allowed me to connect with communities both close to home and far away.

You've been honored for your academic work and your tennis by the UAA and the College Sports Communicators. You're also a Provost's Circle Scholar. Are there enough hours in the day for everything?
I have found that staying organized has been key. Balancing tennis has actually helped me manage my time better. It provides structure to my day and keeps me focused and motivated. Throughout college, I think I've really found the right rhythm with tennis, where I can stay on top of my responsibilities while doing something I enjoy.

As a workshop leader for Organic Chemistry, are you a problem solver for the students or a teacher covering certain points?
I'd say I'm more of a problem solver for the students. I have found it really important to understand the process of getting to the answer, especially in Organic Chemistry, where there are often many steps involved. I focus on making sure we break down each step together, really digging into how we get from one point to the next. It's not just about getting the right answer, but about understanding how to problem solve and get there. Through leading workshops, I've also become a better problem solver myself.

Which classes are you looking forward to in the Fall semester?
I'm looking forward to BIOL 257L - Applied Genomics With Lab this Fall. The course teaches how genomics is applied to solve important biological problems like genome sequencing. I'm excited about it because it gives me the chance to further combine my interest in biology with computational analysis, which has already been incredibly helpful in my research. I am excited to learn more ways to analyze biological data.

Raquel Williams

Women's Basketball

HOMETOWN: Alameda, CA MAJOR: Health Policy and Black Studies

You are a senior now and one of the players who is expected to help the younger players adjust. How will you do that?
I think the best way to help players adjust is just to be there when they need you. For me, I want to be that person who is always available to answer a question, be a sounding board, or anything people need from me.

When you arrived for your first season on campus, who were the players who helped your class? What did they do?
The upperclassmen first year were extremely helpful by sharing their experiences and allowing me to ask all my silly questions. On the court, Julie [Okoniewski] and Callie [McCulley] helped with plays and learning drills. Maura [Leverone] and I had a special bond both being public health majors so, we were able to talk about coursework. Everyone gave support in all aspects of adjusting to the collegiate experience.

What did you take away from that?
I took away the importance of just being there. Consistent support means a lot more than it sometimes looks.

You have a dual leadership role in two campus organizations. You are the founder and president of the Black Student Athlete Coalition (BSAC) and the Black Student Union (BSU). What are the goals of BSAC and what will the Black Student Union aim to achieve in this year?
This year I am switching around some of my leadership roles. I am still the president of the Black Student Athlete Coalition (BSAC) but, I am now the second president of the UAA Conference Black Letter-winning Athlete Coalition (UAA BLAC). I needed to consolidate my opportunities so, I would ensure I am making an impact in all my responsibilities and not overwhelmed.

The goals of BSAC are to be a community. To provide resources, support, and people who have shared experiences. We will have an array of events from personal to professional development to better ourselves and the overall Black student athlete space. UAA BLAC is very similar but, its intentions are to provide cross-institutional collaboration.

You are a member of the Varsity Student Athlete Advisory Committee. What projects will VSAAC undertake this year?
VSAAC will be doing some mental health events this year which I am super excited about because of all the stigma surrounding student athletes. I also know some BSAC and VSAAC will be doing some collaborations this year which will be super exciting.

The official start of the school year is the first day of class. You have several on-campus leadership roles in addition to women's basketball. Your calendar is getting pretty full, isn't it?
Absolutely. I know I am super busy but, its all about being organized and transparent about the responsibilities. I like to be clear what I can do and what I will need to delegate to others.

You have a double major of Health Policy and Black Studies plus a minor in Political Science. Do they interact at all?
For sure. I love both my majors and my minor because they intertwine consistently. Looking at Health Policy through a Black Studies lens allows me to focus specifically on the structural issues that plague minorities and how to address them. Simultaneously, Black Studies and Political Science look at other societal issues that have health impacts, allowing me to be more informed.

Have you done any internships here or at home in California tied to your studies? Where did you intern and what did you do?

Yes, I recently did an internship in San Francisco at the Emerson Collective. They are a social impact company addressing the world's issues. I was interning on their Political Team which directly manages their political philanthropic efforts. I was able to research, catalog, and organize data to best support political initiatives approaching the upcoming election.

What made the University attractive for you as a place for your academic focus and a place to play basketball?
The University was attractive as soon as I researched the academics and basketball. I wanted a rigorous academic institution but, would still give me an opportunity to be competitive with basketball. The cluster system also seemed that I would have the opportunity to take a bunch of interesting courses which I have taken full advantage of.

Which courses have you taken that you have really enjoyed?
My first favorite course was Racism in Public Health, that I took my first semester of college. It was the class that opened me up to Health Policy and inspired my major and future career paths within health policy spaces. Secondly, I would say Global Health Ethics, which was a bioethics course, that made me re-think some of the world's health issues and how anyone could address them. Lastly, I would say Black Drama, because it was my Black Studies elective course, and it was fun to look at different aspects of theater.

Which courses are you looking forward to studying this semester?
I'm taking The Political Economy of US Food Policy, and I am (very) excited because that is another aspect where political science and healthcare are intersecting. I do not know much about food policy within the political landscape but, I know it is (really) important for the economy and for health outcomes.