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## IWU Athletes Take on Elementary Students- and Everybody Wins

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Titan football player Brian Kowieski '07 encounters some affectionate interference while supervising a playground kickball game.

### IWU Athletes Take on Elementary Students - and Everybody Wins

January 25, 2006

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - While many college athletes are more concerned with playbooks than playgrounds, four Illinois Wesleyan University football players have made a commitment to kickball - and to the elementary school students who play.

Ryan Gilliam, a junior business major from Berkeley, Ill.; Brian Kowieski, a junior business major from Elmhurst, Ill.; Tom Kudyba, a senior history major from Des Plaines, Ill.; and Brett McWherter, a sophomore undecided major from River Grove, Ill., are playground and lunchroom monitors at Brigham Elementary School in Bloomington, where three to five times a week they supervise students ranging in age from kindergarten through 5th grade.

Geoff Schoonover, principal of Brigham Elementary, said that every year he contacts IWU's head football coach, Norm Eash, in search of students interested in working part-time on the playground and in the cafeteria. The job is convenient for college athletes, who have practices in the afternoon but are free in the middle of the day, during the elementary school's lunch hour. Schoonover explained that while most of his past experiences with student playground supervisors have been positive, this year in particular Gilliam, Kowieski, Kudyba and McWherter "have gone above and beyond their duties by building relationships with the children they supervise."

The IWU students maintain order in the cafeteria, cleaning up spills and distributing condiments during the first lunch period, then move out to the playground to monitor three rotations of recess, each with a different age range of students. "Every recess different kids migrate around us," said Kowieski. "We play kickball with the second and third graders and the kindergarten girls want me to push them on the swings." Other duties include reading out loud and leading group games during indoor recess, when the weather is too cold or wet for the students to go outside.

However, ensuring that students are safe and well behaved is not all fun and games. "We have to enforce the rules," Gilliam said. He explained that, at first, disciplining the students was an adjustment for him. McWherter struggled with the same issue: "The biggest challenge for me is when I have to write the kids a blue slip [a note for misbehavior]," he said.

Before hitting the blacktop, the four young men learned the basic rules of the school and the playground, as well as tips for communicating with children. "We learned to get down and talk to them, face-to-face, to explain things simply," Kudyba said. The student supervisors have even put their foreign language skills to use in order to facilitate communication with the significant Spanish-speaking population at the school.

The school's faculty and staff appreciate the extra pairs of eyes and hands on the playground and the IWU students enjoy the opportunity to earn a little money and win young fans. Most important, though, is the benefit for the elementary school students. According to Schoonover, role models like the IWU athletes are sorely needed at the school, where 60 percent of the students come from low-income families and many do not have male role models at home.

"The kids are really good, they just need attention and direction," Kudyba said. "You come in and you have a line of hugs waiting for you."

Football season is long over, but all four of the athletes have chosen to continue working at the school this spring and even adjusted their schedules in order to spend more days each week on the job.

"These students have chosen to engage with the kids, to make an impact on their lives," said Lora Wey, whose son, Christian, attends Brigham Elementary. The positive influence of the athletes is evident from the reactions of the younger students, several of whom attended IWU football games in order to cheer on the Titans who are their supervisors, mentors and friends.

"I want to grow up to be just like Brian [Kowieski]," Christian Wey, a fourth grader, said to his teacher.