

ROUNDING OUT THE PROS

Organizations Offer Education, Language Training

By Charlee Beasor



There are a few ways to describe tennis superstar Venus Williams: Seven-time Grand Slam singles champion. Four-time Olympic gold medalist. One of the most powerful forehands in women's tennis.

She's also well known as a burgeoning businesswoman. Her fashion line, EleVen, and interior design company, V*Starr Interiors, are just two business pursuits. She and sister Serena are also part owners of the Miami Dolphins.

One of the lesser-known descriptions of Williams is student, specifically at Indiana University (IU) East. And when Williams decided to pursue her bachelor's degree in business at the school, she didn't intend to facilitate a partnership between the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) and IU East. But that's what happened three years ago after the professional athlete enrolled at the regional campus in Richmond for her online degree.

"I looked at a few business schools, some were in Florida (Williams lives in the Sunshine State when not traveling on tour). But it felt like I was part of a family already (at IU East). It really did – it was the right place for me and, of course, I respect IU in general. The education system they have is great on the main campus as well as the satellite campuses," Williams explains.

"I was wearing my IU East sweaters everywhere I went. I just was part of the family from day one."

She has an associate's degree in fashion design. In pursuing her bachelor's degree, Williams is working to enhance her business acumen and learn how to deal with economic and political fluctuations and how those impact her businesses – as well as become a better manager and boss. She eventually wants to pursue her MBA.

"It's really rounded me out as a business person, whether it's accounting or marketing. When I'm sitting in meetings, player council meetings, anywhere – I'm so much more well rounded and I'm smiling inside, saying 'Yes! This is all paying off.' I have to stay calm, but I just

get so excited," she offers. "It really gets you motivated because you do have to balance your schedule and manage your time by the second to play tennis, have a couple businesses and finish school. It's worth it."

Reaching a diverse audience

It took two years to work through the legal and technical aspects of an agreement between the WTA and IU East. As of fall 2013, the



IU East offers 10 online bachelor degree completion programs to cater to its rural adult demographic. IU East Chancellor Kathryn Cruz-Urbe (left) and Women's Tennis Association Chair Lisa Grattan sign an exclusive partnership agreement in August 2013.

(opposite page) Tennis champion Venus Williams enrolled at Indiana University East in 2011 to attain her bachelor's degree in business. The school is the exclusive partner for online bachelor's degrees for Women's Tennis Association athletes.

school is the exclusive partner of the WTA for online bachelor's degrees for professional women tennis players.

IU East Director of Admissions Molly Vanderpool notes that the partnership came about "organically" and that Williams is just one of many students pursuing an online bachelor's degree. The school began offering online degree completion programs in 2004 to aid the rural demographics of its region.

"Our region is very rural; it can span over an hour radius of our campus, so the online degree completion is for the adults in our region. What grew from that is that, organically, students – including Venus Williams – found our program," Vanderpool

"We are providing the service to the players (to earn the degree). In return, and also through their enrollment and successes, they have become role models and inspirations – encouragement to students taking online or on-campus classes," Vanderpool explains. "Definitely, they have now become Red Wolves.

"That is really powerful when talking to students in Indiana. They're having classes online with students abroad and professional athletes; it's inspiring to them and hopefully it's giving them the encouragement for persistence.

"It all goes back to the role of a regional campus like IU East. We're helping Hoosiers increase the number of residents with bachelor's degrees and improving our state. Those are

later. That is the most difficult part. You have to put time aside and prioritize. Is it more important to be at the club or get the exam done? There's no way on this earth I want to take accounting twice. That is one of the most intense classes I've ever done and I don't want to do that again," she laughs.

Language, cultural training

IU East is a member of PAADS (Professional Association of Athlete Development Specialists), which assists people and organizations who work with professional athletes to share best practices and resources for athlete development.

The Indianapolis-based Language Training Center (LTC) is another Indiana member of the organization. The company has had an agreement with the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) since 2009 to offer language and cultural training.

Golfers from around the world are part of the LPGA and the athletes travel to numerous countries during their annual schedules, where they are thrown into a variety of languages and cultures they might neither speak nor understand.

That can make conversing with the media and important sponsors difficult and daunting – presenting huge barriers in a game where concentration and focus are of the utmost importance, notes Language Training Center President and Founder Martin George.

"(The agreement) really started as (the LPGA) was going through a little bit of a transition period. They had 95 of their 144 athletes who were foreign born and they were seeing the foreign-born athletes weren't really resonating with some of their sponsors and having more difficulty with their interviewing skills," George recalls.

"This is so they actually know how to use the language in situations where maybe they're interviewing or walking down the fairway and thinking, 'I might win this tournament and then what am I going to do when I have to get on the interview stand and I've got to talk to the TV and radio and newspaper?' Some of them said it really caused them to lose tournaments, because they were so afraid of that interview."

Golfers participating in Pro-Am tournaments need to build a rapport with business people and potential sponsors; and being able to communicate well is paramount to their success.

The LTC's training regimen includes simultaneous interpreting with headsets, and 40



Josh Ehrgott, Language Training Center interpreting director, uses headsets with LPGA golfers to work on translation and learning various languages.

asserts. "While we don't pursue students outside of our region, they are pursuing us."

There are about 20 WTA athletes currently enrolled in the online degree program, which offers 10 different bachelor's degrees.

"It's just been amazing how the program has developed. For me, it just started out that I wanted a business degree. It's something I've always wanted to have, so I felt like, 'Hey, it's time,' " Williams recalls. "There has to be life after the sport. As an athlete, you end so early, you're quite a young person and you have to figure out who you are and what you do. I'm excited that these other players are figuring that out."

Motivating fellow students

These professional athletes – intentionally or unintentionally – also serve as motivation and inspiration for fellow IU East students, Vanderpool contends. When Williams first enrolled in 2011, a fellow student tweeted her about representing the school at the U.S. Open and she responded back "Go Red Wolves," in reference to her new school's team mascot.

certainly important initiatives to us."

The school assists WTA athletes with admissions, purchasing and shipping books to wherever they are traveling for tournaments and the overall education process. Classes, however, are held on traditional semester schedules and everyone has the same deadlines and coursework – no matter their location or occupation.

"Online classes are not necessarily easier. There is the convenience of time, but these folks are on time zones that are not real convenient sometimes," Vanderpool says. "There are not any differences than the way any other online student (takes courses)."

Williams can attest to that, as well as how helpful the school has been while she's traveling to tournaments and working on her degree. She said the school scanned information from one of her textbooks when it got left behind while she was traveling in Europe.

The time commitment – while worth it, according to Williams – is the most difficult part of getting an online degree.

"Some classes come easier, some are just exams, but you have to plan. And sooner than

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to 80 hours per year of training. LTC teachers travel to all North American LPGA tournaments to assist the players and continue their training.

Cultural relevance

The company has an agreement with the LPGA, but has also provided training to the Indy Racing League, Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, World Wrestling Entertainment, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and Olympic swimming and diving teams. The company started out as a business-to-business language and cultural provider and still does half of its work with companies in the state, as well as with government entities.

When George first started the organization in 1993, companies were traveling to Chicago or Cincinnati to get language and cultural training for their employees.

“What we do allows companies to bring the best of the best internationally, whether they need a translator, interpreter, whatever they need. . . . Businesses in Indiana do not want to be left behind; they can’t be left behind (in global exchange).”

It’s a similar story for LPGA athletes – not getting left behind. One player, Beatriz Recari, from Spain, began learning Japanese because she loves to play there, says George. Since she’s started focusing on the language and culture, she’s gained Japanese sponsors who have paid her airfare to fly to the country.

“It’s amazing how far it goes if you take a little bit of time and energy to know some Chinese or Japanese. You erase some of that ‘ugly America;’ you become culturally relevant and sensitive and you can connect with the other person. Our athletes are doing a lot better,” he adds.

RESOURCES: Martin George, Language Training Center, at www.languagetrainingcenter.com
Molly Vanderpool, Indiana University East, at www.iue.edu | Venus Williams at www.venuswilliams.com