Distributed by UW News Service March 3, 2025

Link to original story: <https://www.uwec.edu/stories/former-uw-eau-claire-athletes-serving-community-physical-therapists>

Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59G8mj4zadQ>

Former UW-Eau Claire athletes serving the community as physical therapists

**Story by UW-Eau Claire**

Though they graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire more than a decade apart, Northwoods Therapy physical therapy practitioners Tessa Pecha and Anna Graaskamp have much more in common than their workplace and alumni status.

Both were kinesiology majors in the pre-physical therapy track, and both were Eau Claire high school athletes recruited by Blugold athletics — Pecha for softball in 2004 and Graaskamp for basketball in 2016.

Most importantly, perhaps, both also say they shared the best possible preparation for graduate school at UW-Eau Claire.

When her doctoral program was over, Pecha returned to the Chippewa Valley and joined the healthcare community at Northwoods Therapy. Her therapy practice is not the only way she’s giving back, however.

“About five years ago, I established a scholarship for kinesiology students with the help of the UW-Eau Claire Foundation,” Pecha says.

“Through this fund, I’m able to support two students each year. While it’s not a huge amount of money in the grand scheme of grad-school costs, that annual gift lets me spread the feeling of support I received from faculty emerita Mery Mero years ago through a similar scholarship. I hope it also instills the importance of giving back in a couple of pre-professionals each year.”

As Graaskamp began her graduate school application process in 2020, she says she was grateful for the shift the kinesiology department had begun to make toward a stronger focus in rehabilitation science, now a full major in the department. UW-Eau Claire gave her a “step up” over other grad school applicants, Graaskamp says.

“It was an academic foundation that I’ve relied on and one that has helped the UWEC kinesiology department become even more renowned as a top-tier pre-professional program,” she says.

Physical therapists work with patients across all demographics, but as an alumna, the chance to work with current Blugold athletes recovering from injury is especially rewarding for Graaskamp.  She says that personal experience informs her work with athletes in both technical and interpersonal ways.

“As a junior on the women’s basketball team, I tore my ACL and went through two surgeries and a long recovery,” she says. “My experiences as a patient right here at Northwoods went a long way in reinforcing my career choice, for sure.

“My own injury and recovery experiences give me empathy that brings more trust with recovering athletes. It’s so rewarding to use my training and my personal experience to get them back to their sport — I know how important it is to them.”

**Program growth in kinesiology brings continued success to Blugolds**

Since joining the faculty in the kinesiology department at UW-Eau Claire, Dr. Marquell Johnson, professor and chair, has seen major change and growth of kinesiology programs.

When he came to UW-Eau Claire in 2007, Johnson says “just a handful of students each year” were accepted to graduate school for doctoral degrees in programs like physical therapy, occupational therapy or chiropractic. Johnson says those numbers now hover in the high 20s every semester.

In the last 18 years, Johnson has seen UW-Eau Claire become a premier undergraduate institution for pre-professional students in those fields, with Blugolds routinely accepted into regional graduate programs, sometimes at a higher rate than graduates of those same institutions.

“Right now, for example, we have 27 kinesiology alumni enrolled in the physical and occupational therapy doctoral programs at The College of St. Scholastica, with Blugolds representing the highest enrolled total for three cohorts in a row. I’m not aware of another area undergrad program that can make that claim,” Johnson says.

**The differentiator for Blugolds**

In explaining the high graduate school acceptance rates for Blugold kinesiology graduates, Johnson points to the range of experiential learning requirements for kinesiology majors, along with [community-based outreach programming](https://www.uwec.edu/kinesiology-department/kinesiology-community-outreach) that puts students in clinical settings with clients across all stages of life. Such experiences include:

* Community Fitness Program, initially a cardiac rehabilitation program, now supports anyone with a variety of physical issues who seek structured individual or group fitness activities in an inclusive environment.
* P.R.I.D.E., which is a physical and recreational program for children and adults with disabilities in the Eau Claire area.
* Cancer Recovery and Fitness Program, to help survivors reduce fatigue and build endurance during or after their cancer treatment.
* Parkinson’s Exercise Program, meeting strength, balance and flexibility needs of patients.

Johnson says he got a call in December from a physical therapy graduate program director in the state who had just completed an admissions interview with a Blugold applicant, and the director “had some questions.”

“He told me that our student had just given the best interview they’ve had, and that if indeed all our undergrads are exposed to that same level of experiential learning across such a range of patient demographics, he was very interested in getting all our graduates to apply to their program. He was blown away,”  Johnson says.

**One more alumnus giving back at UW-Eau Claire**

For Dr. Nicholas Beltz, associate professor of kinesiology and director of the department’s Parkinson’s Exercise Program, it’s hard to overstate the advantages to Blugold students provided by these many outreach opportunities.

Beltz emphasizes that most graduate programs have identical prerequisite coursework, courses that most applicants will have completed successfully. These “extras,” he says, allow Blugold applicants to stand out as graduate school applicants.

“It is the practical experience that sets our students apart,” says Beltz, a 2010 UW-Eau Claire kinesiology graduate.

“Our rehabilitation science and other pre-PT majors graduate with multiple years of hands-on experience working directly with members of our community across a vast spectrum of ability levels and chronic conditions — it’s unparalleled undergraduate experience.”

Additionally, students in these majors gain extensive experience in the laboratory setting, gaining proficiency in methods for collecting physiological data later applied across a year of research methods courses and projects.

“Altogether, the experiences represent something much closer to a graduate-level than undergraduate preparation,” says Beltz, who credits that same excellent preparation for his own desire to return to UWEC as a faculty member.

“UW-Eau Claire was the ‘dream job’ — the extensive student-faculty research opportunities, the connections between faculty, students and community and the culture of the department are so rare. I always knew I wanted to be part of this program.”

Johnson says nothing brings more pride than seeing former students like Beltz, Pecha and Graaskamp achieve success in their careers, success that Blugold kinesiology majors are finding in places across the country.

“We have students out there doing great things in Colorado, Montana, Washington, Pennsylvania, really all across the United States,” Johnson says.

“I’m a guy who is captivated by stories, and so many of our alumni share their great stories with us all the time. And these are stories we can share with our undergraduate students, stories that can really stick with them.”