

March 2017

Sports Standout On and of the court: Academic All-American has the highest GPA of all JMU tennis players

Lisa Freedman
James Madison University

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Recommended Citation

Freedman, Lisa, "Sports Standout On and of the court: Academic All-American has the highest GPA of all JMU tennis players" (2017).
Monty. 85.
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Academic All-American has the highest GPA of all JMU tennis players

By Lisa Freedman ('05), Montpelier editorial assistant

REBECCA VANDERELST IS ANYTHING BUT A STEREOTYPICAL JOCK. THIS JMU JUNIOR DEFIES ALL PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS AS SHE MAKES HER MARK ON THE TENNIS COURTS AS WELL AS IN THE CLASSROOM. HER OUTSTANDING EFFORTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS HAVE NOT GONE UNNOTICED BY HER COACH OR THE PUBLIC.

In the classroom, Vanderelst was named an Academic All-American, which requires at least a 3.5 GPA. Vanderelst currently holds the highest GPA on the tennis team. She was also honored at the annual Verizon/JMU Athletic-Academic Honors Banquet for combining classroom and on-court excellence. "I think that hard work really helps me on the court and in the classroom," says Vanderelst. "Having such a busy schedule really makes me manage my time and focus on getting things done."

JMU's tennis coach, Maria Malerba says, "She has an exceptional ability to balance her academic work load while both practicing and competing 20 hours or more a week and tutoring up to four different people weekly."

Because of Vanderelst's outstanding performances on and off the court, she was selected to attend the annual NCAA Leadership Conference at Disney's Coronado Springs Resort. Vanderelst was one of 302 student-athletes that were selected from among 1,172 applicants.

"I can honestly say the conference was one of the best experiences of my life," Vanderelst says reflecting on the trip. The five-day conference activities, meetings and speakers were planned to educate the attendees. The student-athletes were assigned the task to create a plan for a self-directed project back at their own campuses. "For my project I will be starting a letter writing campaign between JMU varsity athletes and middle school students." The communication science and disorders major hopes that positive role models will motivate younger teens to follow their dreams.

Since Vanderelst was a youngster, she has almost always been around tennis courts. She started playing tennis when she was eight, but her connection to the sport goes back further. Her parents met at a tennis club and her brother went to Seton Hall University on a tennis scholarship. "I have been in the sport for so long that I can't imagine my life without it," says the highly motivated athlete.

Tennis played such a large part in Vanderelst's life through high school that it was a determining factor in picking a university. In her native Canada, there are not many opportunities to play varsity sports after high school. "I really wanted to attend a U.S. school, and JMU was the perfect mix of tennis and school."

Coach Malerba stands by Vanderelst and speaks very highly of the athlete, "Her contributions to JMU are both on and off the court, and we are very lucky to have here as part of our program."