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June 5, 2006

**Jim Lamar, The Osceola**

Talk about it in [The Tribal Council](#)

I don't know how it should be done. I just know it needs to happen. Somehow, some way the people who follow Florida State athletics need to get creative in the next few months.

Garrett Johnson will be leaving FSU. And FSU needs to send him off in a big way. A plaque, a trophy, a billboard just isn't going to cut it. This guy deserves something special.

I've never put much thought into things like this. It never seemed to be that big a deal when even the classiest athletes left campus for brighter futures. Truthfully, watching guys like Charlie Ward or Brad Johnson or Warrick Dunn head off to professional careers seemed like the right thing to see happen.

Kids come on this campus. They make an impact on the field, off the field or both and then they move on. That's exactly the way the system is supposed to work.

But Garrett Johnson is different. And somehow, some way FSU fans need to remind everybody just how special he really is.

If we simply judged Johnson on his athletic accomplishments, we'd still have to pay tribute to him as one of the best in the history of the FSU track and field program.

He is, after all, one of just six male track athletes to win an individual title at an NCAA championship meet. Johnson's indoor title in the shot put this past spring put him on that list.

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He's the school record-holder in the shot put and he could be well on his way to a spot on the 2008 U.S. Olympic team. That, of course, assumes he doesn't get sidetracked by a promising career in the real world.

But it's not the athletic achievements that make Johnson truly unique. This campus has seen plenty of super-elite athletes come and go through the years. Some of them were every bit as successful as Johnson and some were even more talented in their respective sports.

Johnson, though, claimed one honor that no student-athlete on this campus has ever earned.

He is just the second FSU student to be named a Rhodes Scholar. The fact that he's a national champion in the shot put adds just a little more luster to the accomplishment. He's a national champion in track who just happens to have one of the brightest young minds in the world.

And Johnson put that mind to work, earning two undergraduate degrees in three years and doing it with a GPA that is up there in rarified air.

But it's not just the combination of athletics and academics that make Johnson so special.

He is exactly the type of man you want your son to become. He's the guy you pray your daughter falls in love with. He's the guy you meet and say, "There's no way he can be that good."

But you know what? He is.

Have you ever heard about a college track athlete walking into the governor's office and walking out with an invitation to fly to Rome with the First Lady to take part in a cultural exchange program?

That's what happened to Johnson last month ago. He went to Jeb Bush's office to say hello to the same people he worked with while interning for the governor and met world-renowned artist Jonathan Green, who was designated by Laura Bush as Florida's arts ambassador.

The two hit it off and Green decided to invite Johnson to Italy as part of a 10-person delegation that included the First Lady. One of the group's objectives was to build an arts-exchange program in Rome that includes bringing world-class artwork from Rome to Florida museums.

For Johnson, it meant a chance to eat dinner at the home of the U.S. ambassador to Rome and to tour the Vatican, where he said he was "within an arm's length" of the Pope. But mostly, the trip represented just another slice of Garrett Johnson's life.

"I'm pretty good at free-loading," Johnson said with a laugh. "I think I'm going to major in that at Oxford."

The truly special thing about Garrett Johnson is that you never have any reason to question whether that laugh or that smile is genuine or not.

Most times, you meet people who appear to be pretty good folks but there might be something in their eyes or something in their voice that makes you wonder. With Johnson, there are no doubts.

Believe me when I tell you that no one on this campus is as universally loved as Garrett Johnson. If you've never met him, you'll probably have a hard time understanding exactly what that really means. But if you've

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met him, you're probably nodding your head right now and saying, "Ain't that the truth."

Garrett Johnson is special. Really, really special.

"I mean this from the bottom of my heart," said Dave Hart, FSU's director of athletics. "I've been doing this for 20 years and I can't ever remember being around an individual who brought so much to the table in terms of commitment to community service, leadership, a willingness to learn and everything else he provides to this campus. He is a sponge. He wants to learn everything and he always wants to be moving in a positive direction.

"It has been a real treat and a real pleasure to be at Florida State while Garrett Johnson has been a student-athlete here."

You may never see praise like that come from a person in Hart's position again. He may praise future student-athletes for their character or for their commitment to community service or for their remarkable athletic achievements or for their academic accomplishments, but you may never hear one person be praised for all of that at the same time.

That's why something has to be done to pay tribute to Garrett Johnson. Somehow, some way, something has to be done.

The student-athletes on campus already made their statement.

It came during the Golden 'Nole awards last month, when the athletics department recognized student-athletes for their work in the community. Johnson stood front and center at the function, mainly because his job as the chair of the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee called for him to help organize the event.

As the awards ceremony came to a close, Hart grabbed the microphone and made a special presentation to Johnson on behalf of the student-athletes.

As Hart's words faded and he shook Johnson's hand, the crowd of athletes rose to their feet at once and delivered a standing ovation that was said to have lasted more than five minutes.

"I told our staff and coaches and they agreed with me – I've never seen anything like that in terms of sheer collective respect being displayed for a peer in a setting like that," Hart said. "I've never seen anything approach that level.

"I expected a warm response. I thought the student-athletes would applaud him for what he has meant to this campus. But in no way did I anticipate that it would be of that magnitude. It was a very touching moment."

The thing about Johnson, though, is that he was embarrassed by the standing ovation. He said he didn't know how to react, didn't know where to put his hands, didn't know who to look at and didn't know how he could get the applause to quiet.

Johnson also said it was that kind of moment that reminded him why he wanted to be a part of the Florida State community.

"It would have been nice if it never had happened, but it did and I was humbled by it," Johnson said. "But that's why I came to Florida State and it's what attracted me to Florida State -- the genuineness of the people. I wanted to be a part of this."

I don't know what happens to Garrett Johnson after he leaves the Florida State campus this summer.

He may come back, he said, and take part in one more track season with the FSU program. His academic schedule at Oxford may allow him a window of opportunity to compete during the outdoor season this time next year.

Or he may get caught up in whatever it is that Oxford has to offer and decide that putting on the FSU uniform one more time isn't at the top of his priority list.

He says he will devote his efforts to competing in the 2008 Olympics and that -- at least for now -- his plan is to then walk away from competition and focus on the rest of his life.

Whichever path he chooses, Garrett Johnson has already left a lasting impression on the FSU athletic community. He's a special human being, and he's the kind of person that people on the FSU campus need to remember in the coming years.

I don't know how it should be done. I just know it needs to happen.

Somehow, some way FSU needs to salute Garrett Johnson one more time.

*Jim Lamar is the general manager of the Osceola.*

*Check back throughout the week for more coverage about the track team's quest for a national title.*

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