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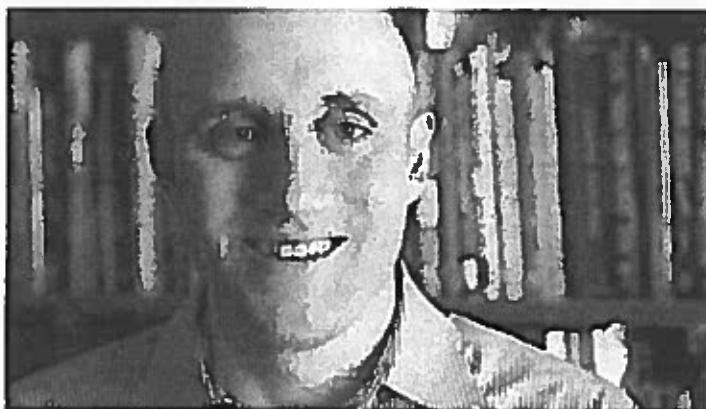
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## Basketball and books

WFU professor and student connect teens, sports and literature

 By CHERYL WALKER ('88) *Office of Communications and External Relations*

Talking about sports on Thursday afternoons is helping a group of high school students become better readers.



Wake Forest education professor Alan Brown and graduate student Jordan Daniels ('14) lead a sports and literacy group for ninth and tenth grade boys at Southwest Guilford High School. The after-school meeting starts with good-natured banter about favorite teams and players, then shifts to discussions of sports-themed novels.

During the ACC Basketball Tournament week, the high schoolers are reading *Boy 21*, a young adult novel by Matthew Quick centered on two high school basketball players.

Daniels draws a stick figure basketball player on the whiteboard and asks the group to describe the perfect basketball player. The teens argue about height, weight, passing and rebounding, but finally settle on a list of ideal physical and mental characteristics. Then, they are ready to talk about setting and character development and tackle some unfamiliar vocabulary.

"As a kid I was both an avid reader and sports fan," said Daniels, who plans to teach in North Carolina after he graduates with a master's degree in education in May. "I recognize that many students have similar interests in sports. So, we read young adult sports literature to improve students' analytic skills by having them practice talking, writing, reading and listening."

Since they started the program in the fall, several principals, coaches and

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Daniel talks with a student after the March 13 meeting

librarians have expressed interest in creating something similar at their schools. Brown's goal is to develop this program as a model others can implement to help reluctant and engaged readers, both male and female.

"We are always looking for ways we can engage reluctant

readers," said Holly Maness, a media specialist at Southwest Guilford who worked with Brown and colleague Karen Meier to set up the group and secure grant support to buy books. "Hopefully, this will make them come to the media center and check out other books like these."

### Sports + reading

"Sports can be an entry point into literature," Brown said. "Love sports or hate them, it's hard to deny their prominence in American society and their popularity with twenty-first century adolescents."

In 2009, he created a [website](#) as a resource for teachers, middle and high school students, and their parents. From baseball to soccer to skateboarding, the regularly updated blog provides recommendations for sports-related novels.

Educational research has suggested that sports-minded boys are among the most difficult to engage in reading and writing, Brown said.

A public librarian in Connecticut read Brown's blog and was inspired to organize a program in her town where all the football players at the local high school read the same book, *Running Loose*, by Chris Crutcher, then had the opportunity to talk with the author.

A few years ago, when Brown was a graduate student at Wake Forest, he ran the track early in the morning at the same time as basketball coach Skip Prosser. Brown was inspired by the way the late coach linked teaching with coaching. When Brown taught English at Southwest Guilford before becoming a college professor, he also coached basketball. He read poetry to his team, including John Updike's "The Ex-Basketball Player," and encouraged them to write in journals. He hopes to inspire more of this kind of crossover between reading, writing and sports.

### What makes a good sports book?

"The key is to remember that fine young adult (YA) sports novels are about people and the complications that entangle them, not about games," said Brown. "The best of these novels offer well-developed characters facing

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common experiences and challenges pertinent to teen readers with sports merely providing the hook, backdrop, and/or setting."

The right questions for parents and teachers to ask kids when trying to get them to read, said Brown, are: "What do you like? What are you most interested in?"

Sometimes the answer is sports.

### A model for others

English teachers across the country have learned from Brown's panel discussions at national conferences, where he often invites authors of YA sports novels to join the discussion of how to engage students in reading and writing through the sports lens.

Brown was invited with fellow researcher Chris Crowe of Brigham Young University to edit a special issue of the *English Journal* (the leading practitioner journal for English/Language Arts teachers) called "A Whole New Ballgame: Sports and Culture in the English Classroom." Due out in September, the articles in it will explore possibilities in the English classroom for considering and critiquing the culture of sports that surrounds today's students.



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