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HEADLINE: U-Md.'s Other Winning Team;
Academic Side Has Risen Along With Sports Program

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BODY:

This season, for the first time in a quarter-century, the University of Maryland has a men's basketball team and a football team that both rank in the top 10 in the country, inspiring a surge of school spirit, an onslaught of donations and blanket coverage from sports publications.

Here are some other figures about Maryland that haven't made it onto the national news:

In the past decade, the grade-point average of incoming freshmen at College Park has shot up from 3.0 to 3.76. The university's research funding nearly tripled over the same period, while its graduate programs are climbing the national rankings. This year, it hired its first Nobel laureate, physicist William Phillips.

One longtime English professor jokes half-seriously that he hopes one of Maryland's marquee teams starts losing some games next year.

"I don't want to see us be known primarily as one of the few large state schools with two strong teams in football and basketball," said Maynard Mack Jr., who also runs the undergraduate honors program. "I want us to be known for what we can do for students."

Many believe that Maryland's other success story has been unduly overlooked -- its transformation in less than a generation from the last resort for the state's C students to one of the most competitive public universities in the country.

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And some faculty members fret that Maryland's emergence into big-time college sports could overshadow other priorities and achievements when it's still trying to cement an academic reputation in the public mind.

"You'd be hard pressed to find another university moving at this pace," said President C.D. Mote Jr. "Big institutions don't change this rapidly."

Sports helped power this surge, Mote and other university leaders said. Winning teams put Maryland in a national spotlight, inspiring more alumni to give money and more high school students to apply. And they have imbued an often jaded commuter campus with something resembling a true school spirit.

Yet some at Maryland are watching the athletic success warily. A few postgame celebrations this year reeled out of control, embarrassing a school that has worked hard to stifle a once notorious party scene. And memories are still fresh of another time 15 years ago when the school achieved national athletic prominence only to suffer a devastating blow to its image with the cocaine-induced death of all-American basketball forward Len Bias.

Indeed, Maryland is still living down its reputation of a generation ago. Until the 1980s, it was virtually an open-enrollment school -- admissions officers would visit high schools and admit students on the spot. Not until a little more than a decade ago did it start asking applicants to write essays.

"The only rankings we made were the party school rankings, and we did quite well in those," Provost William E. Destler said dryly. Destler, who joined the engineering faculty in 1973, said freshman year was typically a "bloodbath," as dozens of students haphazardly admitted were allowed to flunk out.

Maryland's transformation was the payoff of 20 years' work. In the late 1970s, President John S. Toll shook up campus by dramatically raising standards for faculty. "When I came in, people were tenured for being nice colleagues," said philosophy professor James Leshner, a 34-year veteran. "That all changed. You had to show that you were qualified based on quality published research."

In the late 1980s, Maryland officials designated College Park the state's flagship university. That enabled the college to shrink the freshman class from a massive 5,000 to about 3,200 to improve the quality of undergraduate instruction -- and also to enroll a smarter cohort.

The university's new sense of mission was hobbled by deep budget cuts in the early 1990s. But under President William E. Kirwan, the focus on undergraduates continued with the creation of specialized, academically challenging programs designed to make a big school seem small -- and to appeal to ambitious students.

Today, the undergraduate honors program -- featuring small interdisciplinary seminars rare at big universities -- enrolls 700 freshmen a year who have higher grades and SAT scores than the entering class at Johns Hopkins, according to program director Mack. For students who don't make it into honors, there are an array of other programs, including residence halls structured around intellectual or community service themes. About 56 percent of undergrads are now enrolled in such special programs, and Mote and others said they want to expand the offerings to cover everyone.

And suddenly, a lot of people want to come. An unexpectedly high number of students accepted Maryland's offer of admissions this year, creating the biggest class in more than a decade. University officials have decided to reduce the size of next year's freshman class -- to 3,900, from this fall's bloated 4,400. Already, early applications are up 10 percent, ensuring that competition will be unusually fierce.

Jeremy Rachlin, a 21-year-old psychology major from Silver Spring, came to Maryland with a sense of regret that he had turned down Northwestern. His doubts quickly lifted when he enrolled in the elite Gemstone program, in which 15-member teams collaborate on a sociological or technological study.

Rachlin's group is now wrapping up three years of research into reform proposals for criminal justice and drug

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treatment. "It feels like what I had imagined what a real quality education would be like," he said.

That kind of talk is welcomed by Mote, a prodigious fundraiser and former vice chancellor at the University of California at Berkeley, who has pushed the state to fund Maryland at the level of its "aspirational peers" -- North Carolina, Michigan, Illinois -- and insists that Maryland can be just as good.

Increasingly, people here seem to believe it. Sarah Tishkoff, a rising young expert in human evolution hired by the biology department last year, was impressed by Maryland's willingness to provide all the scientific tools her research demanded.

"I felt like it was better to get into a place that was moving and improving," said Tishkoff, one of two Maryland professors awarded a prestigious Packard fellowship this fall. "This has the potential to become like a Berkeley."

Nils Hasselmo, president of the Association of American Universities, said Maryland has "made the most aggressive moves" of the nation's major research institutions, particularly in beefing up its math, computer science and social science programs.

"Athletic excellence can come more quickly and go more quickly," he said. "But Maryland has been able to sustain the academic excellence that has moved it into the competitive ranks."

For the most part, Maryland faculty members are happily succumbing to the new Terps fever, at least for now. "There's a buzz on campus, and that's a good thing," said Andrew Morehead, a young assistant professor of chemistry. "The energy level is great."

To show their support, Maryland's academic deans all dyed their hair red last month for a giddy photo op honoring the football team's victories. "I told the deans I'd dye my hair red if half my team made the honor roll," quipped coach Ralph Friedgen.

Maryland's athletics have followed a trajectory similar to its academics. A basketball team weakened when Bias's death forced out legendary coach Lefty Driesell was devastated two years later by stiff penalties for NCAA rules violations. Coach Gary Williams, hired in 1989, slowly rebuilt the team by the mid-1990s, racking up eight straight trips to the NCAA tournament. Football, meanwhile, had slumped since Maryland won three consecutive conference titles in the early 1980s. Maryland cycled through three coaches before hiring alumnus Friedgen this year.

He managed to take a team largely made up of last year's 5-6 Terps to a 10-1 season. "It seems like something right out of Hollywood," Friedgen said.

Mote said there was no special strategy to build an athletic program that would bring glory to the institution. Maryland wanted a winning football team, but "we ought to win at everything we touch," he said. Reflected glory, in fact, is about all the larger institution gets. Ticket revenues, licensing deals and merchandise sales go back to fund the athletic program; none of that money goes to the academic side.

Clearly, though, reflected glory goes a long way. The university's alumni association, which barely existed more than a decade ago, now has its phones "ringing nonstop" with graduates wanting to join or to start a booster club in their area, said director Danita Dias.

"People want to be part of something successful," she said.

Mote said athletics are key to mustering support among donors and legislators. "There are few things that bring hundreds of thousands of people to campus," he said. "We invite people to games, and they will come because of the sports, but we have opportunities to have conversations about the performing arts, about the science programs."

And students said winning teams have brought something College Park was long missing -- school spirit. Michael

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Norris, 22, from Crofton, remembered the night last year when the basketball team scored an upset over Duke. Suddenly, the campus was alive with students singing, chanting and finally gathering on Fraternity Row for a bonfire.

"You didn't know any of these people around you, but you felt like you were best friends the entire night," said Norris, an economics and government major who graduated last week. Sports traditions like these, he said, are drawing more students to Maryland and intensify the loyalties of those who come.

But the intensity sometimes has gone over the top. University officials were embarrassed this year by students singing profane lyrics to a pep band song and by the debris that some threw onto the basketball court after a loss to Duke in January, injuring the mother of an opposing player. After the team's March loss in the Final Four, students were arrested and charged with stoking bonfires that caused thousands of dollars of damage to cable television lines.

University officials responded by placing several restrictions on fan behavior and trying to open a campuswide discussion of proper sportsmanship.

"This is an institution that is maturing overnight," said anthropology professor Mark Leone, "and this is a part that isn't maturing as fast."

Faculty members expressed other concerns about attention paid to sports. Many still gripe about the pressure from state legislators to fast-track the construction of the basketball arena when academic buildings desperately needed renovations.

Most expressed admiration for the coaches and athletic director Debbie Yow, who they said seem genuinely committed to running an honest program and getting their players a quality education. But many fear that the dynamics of today's big college sports programs pose a potentially corrupting influence, that under different athletic leadership, professors might one day find themselves pressured to pass star athletes. And some shudder at the corporate logos attached to the new arena, which will be known as the Comcast Center.

"There is this disturbing sense among the faculty that strong institutional controls may not be in place," said Leshner, a self-professed Terps fanatic.

Meanwhile, there is the question of the university's identity. Morehead, the chemistry professor, said perceptions lag behind reality. "I have a student whom I'm encouraging to apply to grad school at Harvard and Cal Tech, and her response is, 'Well, am I good enough?' . . . I hate to break it to people, but we are that good."

This year, the university spent \$ 650,000 on a public relations campaign to spread that news. With full-page newspaper ads and prime-time TV commercials, the "Zoom" campaign touted the rising SATs, a research collaboration with NASA to probe the interior of a comet, its new performing arts center.

"And then there's the basketball thing," the ads coyly concluded. Later variations acknowledged "the football thing."

And those aren't bad things, said Provost Destler. "Sports has an important place in building identity," he said. On days when the University of Michigan is playing, he said, everyone across that state hangs "Michigan" signs, even at Michigan State. Finally, he said, Maryland is on the verge of creating that kind of pride across the state.

Very well, faculty members say. "It would be nice," Cartwright said, "if it was because we hired a Nobel Prize winner."

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