

My Experience As A Student-Athlete In The US

Nienke van Staveren



Nienke van Staveren is UStudy's Social Media Liaison. She is an alumna from Shorter University (Rome, Georgia) and was a member of the varsity tennis team. Nienke is now working on graduate research for her Masters in Drug Innovation at the National University of Singapore.

22

Says Nienke, "BE WARNED: Studying abroad can be addictive!"

I was in VWO 5 and the time had come to think about my next step after graduation. I had no idea. One thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to do something different. After six years in the same place it was time for a new environment, new people, an adventure, and a new challenge. I had heard a bit about college sports in the US (then still relatively unknown in the Netherlands). It proved to be the perfect fit and to this day it is the best decision I ever made.

It was an incredible experience and apart from the long-term benefits, such as enhancing my resume and the crazy friendships I enjoyed, there were numerous other positives. I didn't have to immediately decide what to focus on in my studies. Due to the American liberal arts and sciences educational system, in addition to the required courses, I was able to choose a variety of courses across faculties. What's more, under full professional guidance I had the opportunity to discover how to best develop in my sport: tennis. Thanks to my tennis and academic scholarships, my education was almost entirely funded by the university. A fantastic opportunity.

My coach picked me up from the airport, where I also met my first friend, a Swiss football player. Fully jetlagged, I picked up my dorm key and found my room, where my roommate was just settling in. A small room with identical closets, beds, desks and chests of drawers. This was my home now, let the adventure begin! And it certainly was an adventure. Seven years later, I still keep in touch with the friends I made during that time. Within no time you build up a good social network.

As an athlete you have a distinct advantage in that you are already a member of a team with whom you will build a strong bond, and your coach will function as your first point of contact for all issues, sports or otherwise. What's more, you will also easily make contacts with other students outside your sport. There is often an introduction camp for all first-years (Freshmen), where you get to know a lot of people. Moreover, you are not just an athlete. You are also an 'international' and everyone will be immediately interested in you.

Of course, it's not fun all the time. You will experience dips and feel homesick. Luckily your friends are near, some of whom are also going through similar experiences. I once had a tough time with my roommate and at night I would cry to my parents over the phone. But eventually everything worked out well. You learn so much, and the fun times definitely outweigh the dips!

High points were the big screen movie nights with the entire campus watching a movie on the lawn, seeing David Guetta live, going to Florida for tournament during Spring Break, to Panama City Beach and Disney during another Spring Break, a long weekend in New York, friendly rivalry between my teammates (on court and during training), the typical American house parties, Halloween, Thanksgiving, the ever recurring road trips to another competition or tournament, encouraging other sport teams, the National Championships official dinner on an army base, the hours spent in the cafeteria (where our meal plan allowed us unlimited food and drink) and on and on. Note: Even though you are studying and playing sport at a high level you WILL still have time for other fun things. After all, you live on campus: everything is close by! Sports fields/halls/stages, the gym, classrooms, the dining hall, dormitories – all in one place.

It was such an amazing time that I decided to stay on for another year. After two years I **23** returned home where I finished my bachelor's degree at Amsterdam University College (as icing on the cake I was able to transfer credit points from America in order to be exempt from a few subjects). I grew so much during my time in America – both personally and in my sport (what a great sports culture they have!!). Apart from my memories, there were even more benefits from my American experience. It helped me in the selection and application process for my studies and work, and I am now fluent in English.

At the moment I'm finishing my Master's in Drug Innovation at the University of Utrecht, which involves graduate research at the National University of Singapore.

