

Connecting with **Champions**

Dan Cross helps student athletes look beyond the last day of competition and build a professional career path.

By Molly Cook

Although **Dan Cross** of **East Orlando** isn't on the basketball court these days, he's still making hundreds of assists. That's because the University of Florida (UF) hall of famer is CEO of Athlete Connections, a local non-profit that educates and prepares athletes for new careers once their eligibility has ended.

For many student athletes, transitioning from the playing field to the working world can be overwhelming. "For most athletes, the end of a sports career is the biggest adjustment he or she will ever make," says Cross, whose personal experience inspired him to create the business. "The transition is bigger than any shot made, any ball caught or thrown."

At a Crossroads

According to the NCAA, nearly 380,000 student athletes participate in collegiate sports each year. Of those, only about 1 percent of graduating students go on to the professional leagues. The other 99 percent must enter the work force.

Ending an athletic career isn't easy. Emotions and stress can run high. A "now what?" feeling is natural for students who have played sports the majority of their lives because they must find and pursue a new talent.

If anyone can relate to these emotions, it's Cross. While at UF (from 1992 to 1995), he helped lead the Gators to their very first Final Four in 1994. After graduating with a degree in communications,

he played pro basketball with several teams across Europe. When he returned to the U.S. a few years later, Cross played in minor professional leagues, but his chances of going pro were slim.

"As an athlete, I felt invincible and wanted to play basketball for the rest of my life," Cross says. "But I knew that sooner or later my career would end. That's when I faced some tough questions: 'What else can I do well? What will I enjoy doing? Am I prepared? What resources do I have?' I needed to figure this out before stepping off the court and into an office."

A New Dream Team

Those questions helped launch Athlete Connections, which ensures that athletes receive the assistance they need to get set for meaningful employment opportunities. According to Cross, athletes possess unique characteristics that are beneficial in the working world—especially when it comes to achieving success and meeting goals.

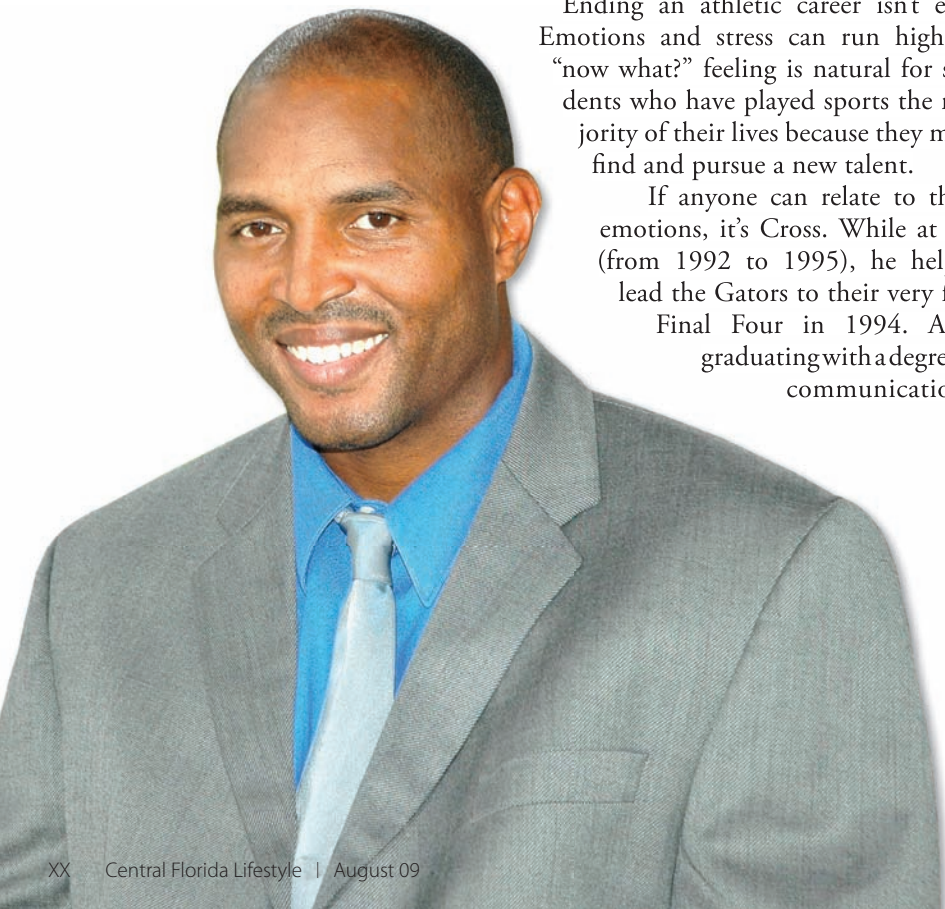
"They've acquired attractive skills like time management, teamwork, competitiveness, loyalty, discipline and leadership that are great assets to any business," says Cross. "But athletes are so busy training, practicing or competing that they have little time to focus on the next chapter of their lives."

Working with sports psychologists **Dr. Harold Shinitzky** and counselor **Jacqui Williams**, Cross developed a workbook curriculum and Web site. Using these resources, student athletes can assess their career goals, search job listings, create resumes, review interviewing tips and even upload an electronic portfolio. An online social forum also connects athletes with potential employers.

More importantly, Athlete Connections hosts bi-monthly networking events designed to help athletes connect with university and college alumni, business leaders and other professionals. Seminars, job fairs, charity events, golf tournaments and even themed parties provide the ideal "meet and greet" setting to find mentors, internships and jobs.

Game Changing Performance

Athlete Connections has assisted more than 100





Dan Cross has gone from basketball player to mentor and guide for hard-working student athletes looking for careers off the court.

student athletes, and **Melissa Amado** is one of them. A native of Vancouver, she attended the University of Tennessee on a soccer scholarship while also pursuing an advertising degree. After graduating in 2008, Amado moved to Kissimmee, where she spent two months interviewing and meeting with people, but without success.

“I started getting frustrated and stressed because I hadn’t found a job that met my standards,” Amado says. “No résumé could explain the grueling schedule I had while competing, or the dedication I’d shown toward academics and personal growth.”

A local ad agency recommended that Amado contact Cross for guidance. When the two of them met, he promised that if she attended an Athlete Connections networking event, she would be exposed to a number of business professionals who were looking to hire people just like her.

Within one week, Amado had 10 job offers and could barely keep track of all the e-mails and phone calls she received from the professionals she had met. She has since started a marketing career with Wyndham Vacation Ownership in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

“I can’t thank Athlete Connections enough for the support, guidance and networking opportunities it provided me,” she says. “I urge all current and former student athletes to get involved with this program. It’s the ultimate training for a whole new ball game.” **L**

Find out how to get involved in Athlete Connections
at CentralFlorida-Lifestyle.com.