

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2024

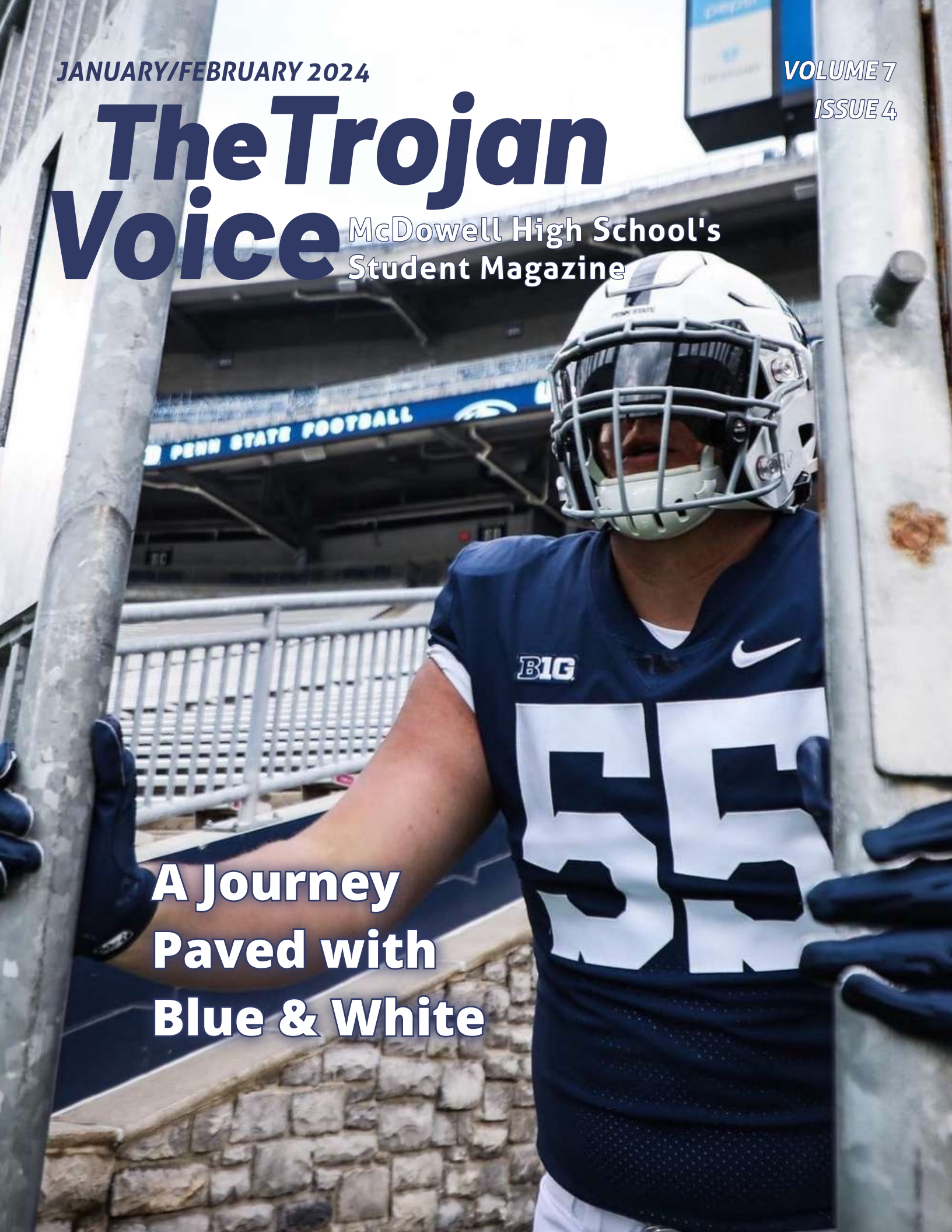
VOLUME 7

ISSUE 4

The Trojan Voice

McDowell High School's
Student Magazine

**A Journey
Paved with
Blue & White**




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**Letters to the Editors? Suggestions? Questions?
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On the Cover: Cooper Cousins traded Trojan blue and white for Nittney Lions uniform after officially enrolling at Penn State University in January

Contributed Photo/Penn State University Athletics

Letter from Editor

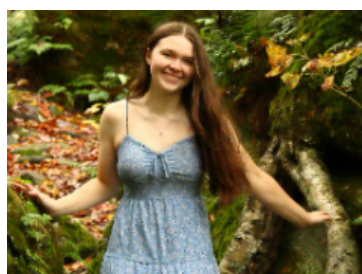
Happy New Year! I hope this letter finds you in high spirits and ready to kick off 2024 with a bang. In this issue of The Trojan Voice, we have curated a collection of captivating articles and thought-provoking interviews to start your year off right. From highlighting football player Cooper Cousins' road to success, to determining whether a new year resolution is worthwhile, we've got you covered. Our team has worked hard to bring you stories that inform and entertain. Evelyn Hoover takes us into the brave, new world of artificial intelligence and two writers share perspectives on mental health in the new year.

We believe the power of reporting a good story can have a significant impact on the community. Through the pages of this issue, we aim to create a sense of community, spark conversations and provide you with a fresh perspective from inside McDowell. We find that this inside view is more valuable, because stories tend to be told from a more relatable perspective.

When it is cold outside, keeping yourself entertained is very important. My favorite activities are things like reading and creating art. But one popular inside activity is building with LEGOs. LEGOs have expanded widely over the years to create various options for users to decide between. In this issue of The Trojan Voice, Co-Managing Editor Emmaleigh Dorau takes a dive into this favorite pastime for young and old. This opinion piece gives an inside view into the reality of the blocks that so many people have grown up with over the years.

None of this issue would be possible without you, our readers. Your continued support throughout the year is what drives us to deliver the best content possible. Thank you for being a part of the Trojan community. We are excited to embark on this new year together and can't wait to see what it has in store. So grab a cup of your favorite winter beverage, cozy up and get into the pages of this issue.

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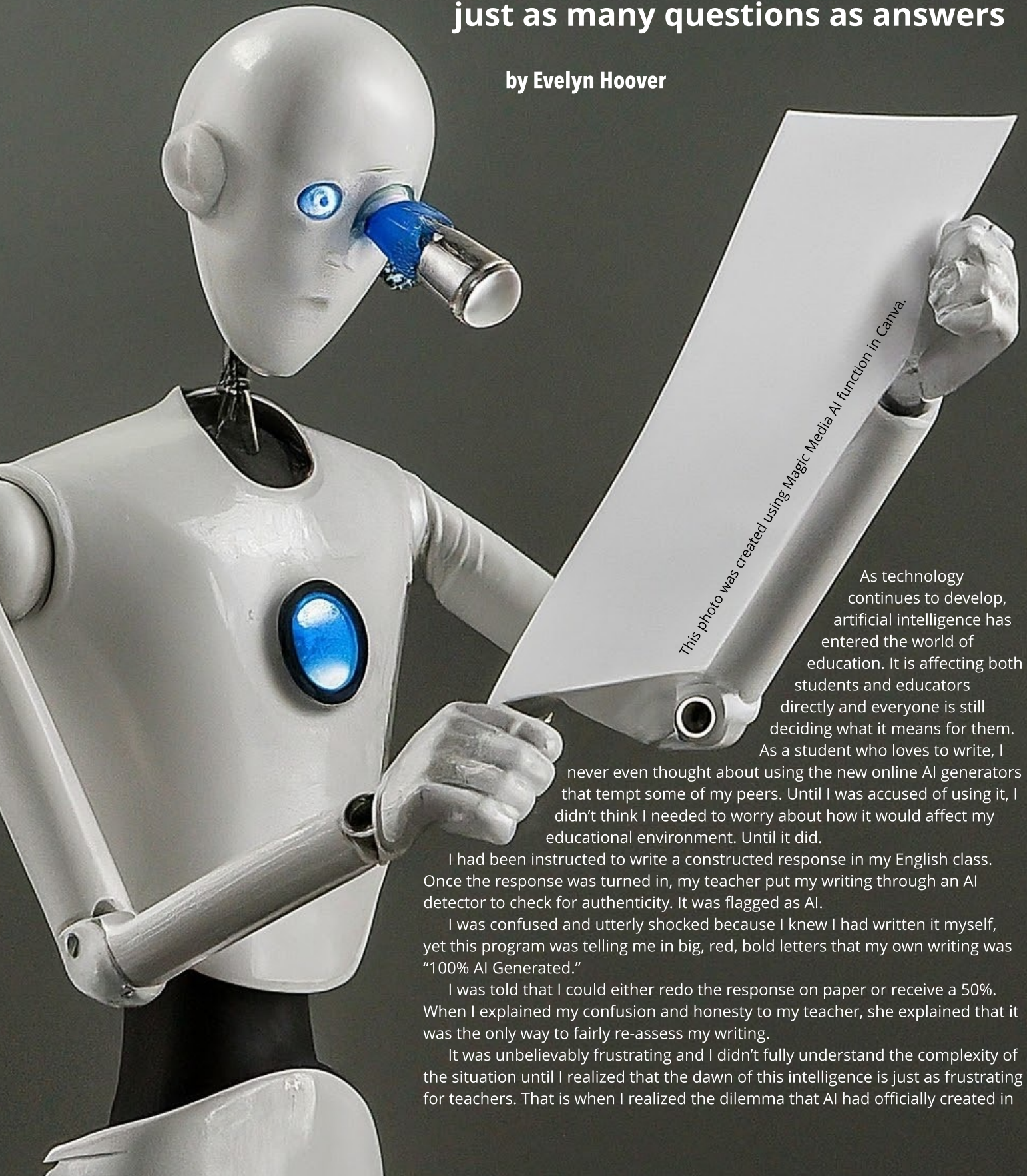
McKenzie Pauli

Emmaleigh Dorau

Student Engagement

Artificial Intelligence in the classroom produces
just as many questions as answers

by Evelyn Hoover



This photo was created using Magic Media AI function in Canva.

As technology continues to develop, artificial intelligence has entered the world of education. It is affecting both students and educators directly and everyone is still deciding what it means for them. As a student who loves to write, I

never even thought about using the new online AI generators that tempt some of my peers. Until I was accused of using it, I didn't think I needed to worry about how it would affect my educational environment. Until it did.

I had been instructed to write a constructed response in my English class. Once the response was turned in, my teacher put my writing through an AI detector to check for authenticity. It was flagged as AI.

I was confused and utterly shocked because I knew I had written it myself, yet this program was telling me in big, red, bold letters that my own writing was "100% AI Generated."

I was told that I could either redo the response on paper or receive a 50%. When I explained my confusion and honesty to my teacher, she explained that it was the only way to fairly re-assess my writing.

It was unbelievably frustrating and I didn't fully understand the complexity of the situation until I realized that the dawn of this intelligence is just as frustrating for teachers. That is when I realized the dilemma that AI had officially created in

or Endangerment?

our community. AI wasn't going to give us answers as much as it was going to test education in ways we hadn't even thought of yet.

Educators are on a side where they have to constantly check that their students aren't using AI in their assignments. Students on the other hand, have to follow specific guidelines in order to pass through these detectors with their own written work and pray that they won't be falsely flagged.

My own experience prompted me to become more intelligent about AI. Vitaly Gleyzer, who specializes in exploration, design and optimization of the latest machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence hardware at MIT Lincoln Laboratory, explained how AI actually works.

"[AI models] look at the context, such as a question or a statement, and then generate the most probable sequence of words that would follow it. A language model achieves this task based on all of the knowledge that it has internalized during training," says Gleyzer.

The training for this hardware is basically a guessing game. Gleyzer describes this process as if sentences from a writing piece are inserted into the algorithm, but before it is put in, a couple of words are blanked out. The algorithm will then guess the missing words and redisplay the sentences.

Years prior, it might have seemed impossible that a little program could cause so much destruction in the education system, but nowadays, everyone is using AI. Whether it be the spell check on your phone or program such as ChatGPT, we have all used AI at least once in our lives.

One McDowell English teacher says she started worrying about AI-generated writing last spring. She was teaching academic classes at the time, and "it was a red flag because it's not typically what I see," she says.

In journalism, the use of artificial intelligence is very useful. We have used it to generate ideas or interview questions that we may not have thought of before. We had also found a problem with it though. If we could generate images using AI, what is stopping journalists from just using AI generated photos for their stories instead of actual photos. And what is stopping them from just letting an AI program write the story altogether.

Gleyzer agrees that people might see AI as another way technology does things for us, but it can do other things, too. "AI will absolutely change the way we think about education, and it will be fantastic!" he says. "LLMs [Large Language Models] have introduced a new way to bring information closer to us, and will evolve to be even better in the future. It's analogous to the way Google search was revolutionary technology in the 90s because it made information that we

needed accessible fast."

Some do not agree with the technology as being fantastic, however. While it makes information accessible, students, more often than not, do not treat it as such. To some, it's a one-and-done transaction. All they have to do is ask it to write something, maybe put in a couple examples, and boom their work is done.

Teachers are concerned that students are not doing the work in the first place, and if students aren't doing these things on their own, then how will they know how to do it in the future?

"It's not so much of, 'Oh I was being lied to,' it's more like, 'If you can't do this now, how are you going to be able to do it in the future?'" one English teacher says. She also said she had the "feeling of, 'Well now I feel like I've failed you because if you're resorting to this, what does that say about me?'"

In reality, the only way a teacher can properly examine if students have actually used AI in their assignments or not is to run it through an AI detector that one English teacher trusted because she paid for a subscription to help her in this new frontier of technology. The software had been recommended to her by colleagues.

"I was very shocked, disappointed and angry because I did not expect it at all," the teacher said. Cheating is not a new practice in education, but teachers get upset when tools marketed to help teachers, had falsely accused her honest students of cheating. "Because I relied on this detection tool, that's all I could do in that moment; present what I saw as evidence or proof," she said.

Gleyzer gave an example of how these detectors work in a way. Imagine that there is a business savvy college student, John, who set up a system where second graders can submit their essays and John would complete the essay for them.

If twenty second graders in the same class turned in their essays, but they are all written by John, the teacher will probably start noticing the patterns in the word choice, punctuation, transitions and style. This thought process by the teacher is the same for LLMs.

They are each trained on a certain set of training data which might consist of millions of books, documents and websites. Training on this data has encoded certain biases and preferences. "If one was to understand the nuances or statistics associated with those biases, then one could postulate that the probability of a human making those same decisions would be improbable," Gleyzer says.

As of right now, these detectors are educators' only defense in this brave new world of AI since it seems the technology is here to stay. "We need to adapt the education system and the homework assignments to teach kids the same critical thinking skills that will help them navigate and understand this new exciting world," Gleyzer says.

**"AI will absolutely change the way we think about education, and it will be fantastic!"
-Vitaly Gleyzer**

ARE NEW YEAR'S

by Evelyn Hoover & Harleigh Larussi

“New year, new me,” is a quote that people are continuously saying every year when the calendar flips to January again. A common tradition for is to make “New Year's resolutions,” a list of goals you want to complete in the new year. Oftentimes people choose objectives to spark productivity or better themselves. And while these are typically made with good intent, people don't always live up to completing their goals throughout the year, prompting the question, “Are New Year's resolutions really a good thing?”

YES!

WRITTEN BY EVELYN HOOVER

The tradition of New Year's resolutions has been around for at least 4,000 years starting with the Babylonians in Mesopotamia. However, their New Year's resolutions were a little different from ours as they focused more on making promises to their gods. In this era, we focus more on bettering ourselves in the new year.

Choosing a goal at the start of the year represents a fresh start to accomplish goals you had all of last year to think about. A whole year to work toward a goal also sounds pretty nice.

Setbacks are common with resolutions when people set unrealistic goals for themselves and that leads to disappointment by the end of the year or even giving up halfway through. However, if you learn how to set realistic resolutions, you may be able to last longer than two weeks and create a happier and healthier mindset for yourself. For example, it may be unrealistic to commit to doing something

everyday, such as a hobby, because you never know what may happen or pop up that day, but it is realistic to do that hobby at least once a week. Plus it would reduce the stress and guilt of not being able to keep up with your resolution.

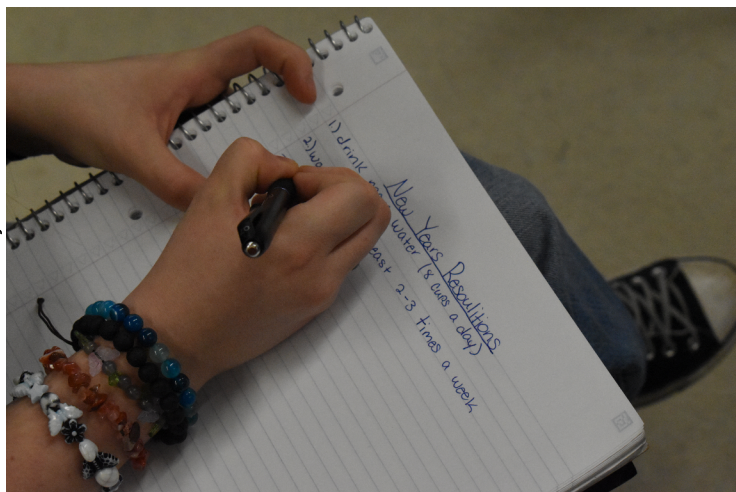
While it may take some time, it is definitely worth it to work towards your goal or keep up with your promise. A resolution is all about you and your decision whether to do or not do something. Focusing on yourself is priority number one, and only you can accomplish your goal. It is good to be prepared and know what you want in the new year because being prepared helps to manage other aspects of your life as well, such as your time and money. You wouldn't want to purchase a gym membership, and never use it.

The key is commitment, if you genuinely commit then you could easily achieve your goal. New Year's resolutions open doors to a world of possibilities in the new year so don't just think of it as a trend, but a fresh start.

**IF YOU LEARN
HOW TO SET
REALISTIC
RESOLUTIONS,
YOU MAY BE
ABLE TO LAST
LONGER THAN
TWO WEEKS**

RESOLUTIONS A GOOD THING?

Claire Gebhardt/The Trojan Voice



NO! WRITTEN BY HARLEIGH IARUSSI

While New Year's resolutions are typically made with good intentions to make yourself a better person or help yourself be more productive, they aren't always a good thing. Research shows that 43% of Americans quit their resolution(s) by the end of January, and in total, only 9% of Americans ever complete their New Year's resolutions. This failure at completing these once-a-year goals risks opening up a major window for people to feel intense guilt.

This can also happen if an individual sees someone else be more successful than them at completing their resolutions, and can cause an individual to compare themselves to others and to completely disregard any progress they have made. This puts the majority of people who make New Year's resolutions at risk for unhealthy emotions.

Not only do New Year's resolutions set people up for feeling unhealthy emotions, but they can promote the idea of procrastinating on those goals during the rest of the year, assuming that the only right time to work on yourself is at the start of a

year. It becomes very easy to say that you will do anything you want or need to do until the beginning of the new year. According to an article in Harvard Business Review, pushing off goals for the "perfect time" to start it, like the new year, can cause whatever you are pushing off to seem unimportant.

Instead of waiting for the new calendar, it's better to start your resolutions after you form the goal and are motivated to

complete it. If you think you're in the right position in your life to set a goal you will be successful any time of the year.

INSTEAD OF WAITING FOR THE NEW CALENDER, IT'S BETTER TO START YOUR RESOLUTIONS AFTER YOU FORM THE GOAL AND ARE MOTIVATED TO COMPLETE IT.

From Comparison to Compassion

The life-changing benefits of being kind to yourself

by Gabriella Serafini

You're casually scrolling through social media when a perfect picture of Kim Kardashian appears. She has the so-called "perfect" body, face, clothes, house and she's rich and famous. A feeling of dread descends over you, consuming your thoughts and emotions as you turn your selfie camera on your face.

"Why can't I look like her?"

"Why can't I have her body?"

These are questions you ask yourself, but what is needed in that moment is actually a bit of self-compassion directed towards yourself.

Compassion involves treating yourself the way you would treat a friend who is having a hard time. Cassidy Flattery, 18, says that self-compassion to her is, "giving yourself grace and being kind to yourself."

It's common for people to believe that self-compassion is really just a form of self pity. But actuality, it is the antidote to self-pity. This is because while self-pity says "poor me," self-compassion acknowledges the pain, validates it, but also recognizes that life is hard for everyone.

Self-compassion is not self-esteem. Pam Dixon, a guidance counselor at McDowell High School says that the difference between the two is, "Self-esteem is the degree to which we evaluate ourselves positively. It's how much we like or value

ourselves which is usually in comparison to others. Self-compassion is not about comparing yourself to others."

The idea of self-compassion may come across as selfishness at a first glance, but when you dive a little deeper into what it is, you'll realize that it's quite the opposite. We can never fully be there for others in a way that is most beneficial to everyone if we first aren't in tune with and taking care of ourselves.

Research shows that self-compassionate people are more likely to engage in perspective taking, rather than focusing on their own distress. Also, when we practice self-compassion, it enables us to actually become better equipped to help those around us.

For example, a part of the self-compassion practice is, "having common humanity." According to psychologist Catherine Moore who wrote an article on Positive Psychology.com, it is important to consider our own individual experiences as embedded in the broader human experience, rather than seeing ourselves as isolated or separate from others. This includes accepting flaws and forgiving ourselves for them because we aren't perfect. Studies on the topic have found that when we realize we're not alone in being imperfect or feeling hurt, rather than withdrawing or isolating ourselves, we

"Self-compassion is not about comparing yourself to others." -Pam Dixon

appreciate that others feel the same at times.

The use of self-compassion has been shown to impact mental health positively.

“It leads to overall feelings of happiness, optimism and feeling connected to others, it also leads to decreased depression, anxiety and fear of failure,” Dixon says.

According to an article on Mindful.org, when we practice self-

compassion, we are deactivating the threat-defense system and activating the care system. Oxytocin and endorphins are released, which helps reduce stress and increase feelings of safety and security.

Flattery has seen the benefit of self-compassion in her life. “It has definitely made my mental health and depression a lot better, it helps me not be so critical of myself and helps me forgive myself,” she says.

It can be hard to begin your journey towards self-compassion because for so many, negative self-talk is an automatic response, sometimes done without even realizing.

To implement compassion into your life Dixon says to start by, “practicing it, writing it down, reviewing it and surrounding yourself with people who will provide you positive feedback and affirmation.”

We often talk to ourselves in ways we would never talk to or treat a friend. Dixon says we can help our friends focus on self-compassion, too.

“Talk to them about caring for themselves as much as they care about others, working with them to come up with concrete examples and writing them down. Talk about self judgment and ways to release judging ourselves,” Dixon suggests. Flattery’s favorite self-compassion



Claire Gebhardt/The Trojan Voice

statement she likes to repeat to herself is, “I made a mistake and that is okay, mistakes are a part of the human experience, I can prevent it from happening again by doing xyz.”

There are other ways to cultivate self-compassion in yourself. Dixon’s examples are to, “comfort yourself with taking care of your body and eating healthy, journaling and sharing with a trusted adult who can help give some positive feedback, positive affirmations and practice mindfulness.” Doing these practices, she says, “will naturally reduce stress, anxiety and difficult emotions. The key is to use these tools faithfully until they are automatic responses in your brain.”

To those who are struggling with their journey of self-compassion, Flattery says, “Be patient, take things one day at a time, write down the thoughts you struggle with and reframe them, practice affirmations.”

Bleeding Blue and White

Cooper Cousins's road to Penn State

by Ryleigh Heasley

When wrestling faded into football for one small athlete, he never thought his new favorite sport would land him in the center of the field snapping the ball and using his 320 pounds to protect the Trojans quarterback.

His success at McDowell set the stage for an unexpected journey that would lead offensive lineman, Cooper Cousins, to the campus of Penn State University five months before the rest of his class even graduates. His unconventional sports track proves that sometimes futures are made by the smallest hands gripping the biggest dreams.

Cousins's football potential was recognized early. By the time most high school sophomores were just figuring out how to survive in the high school hallways, Cousins received a life-altering recruitment offer from Penn State University. Now, two years later, Cousins is trading in the blue and white of McDowell, for the blue and white of Penn State, enrolling as a full-time college student and stepping onto the field as a Nittany Lion in

January.

His early college enrollment came on the tails of Cousins playing in the All-American Bowl on Jan. 6 in San Antonio, Texas, where he was named one of the top performers of the game. According to National Scout Cody Bellaire on the On3 website Cousins was "the most dominant offensive lineman throughout the entire week of All-American practice and he shined during the game on Saturday afternoon. He was the most consistent people mover along the offensive front and if today's game is a glimpse into his future as a Nittany Lion, he will be a problem for years to come at the next level."

Cousins Character

Cousins gives a lot of credit to his teammates and coaches for his success, but his enthusiasm for the game has also inspired others. Cousins has a big personality and never failed to use that to be a great leader. From making his teammates laugh to inspiring young athletes, he will certainly be missed in Trojan

seasons to come. One teammate in particular, not only supported Cousins, but was truly inspired by him. Blayze Myers, McDowell junior and starting quarterback, says, "It's hard for me to even think of football next year without him." Myers and Cousins have been close friends since they were young teammates, they even wrestled together, and Myers considers Cousins a big brother. "Even off the field he is just a person you want to be around because he is funny and a great friend to talk to about anything," Myers says. Former McDowell head coach, Bo Orlando believes that Cousins is a

Offensive Lineman Cooper Cousins prepares for a game during his senior year at McDowell. Once his season ended, he made the transition to college six months earlier than others his age, by enrolling at Penn State University in January.

Contributed Photo/R. Frank Media





His Coaches saw Cooper Cousins as a leader on and off the football field.

positive role model for his teammates. "Not just because he's really good, but also by the way he carries himself and the way he works," says Orlando. "Cooper is unique in that as talented as he is, he works so incredibly hard, tries everyday to make himself a better football player."

Cousins will certainly be remembered by McDowell football for years to come. As the younger athletes learn about his story, they will see that their dreams, no matter how big, are achievable.

"Some people think they can't achieve a full scholarship to a D1 university and Cooper has proved to those coming up that it can happen - you just have to work for it," says Myers.

Even though Cousins has come so far he aims to stay humble. He appreciates everything that he has achieved and continues to work hard, in the gym lifting and running five days a week, to prepare himself to work even harder at Penn State.

The Future

His great work ethic and big personality will help him in his future endeavors at Penn State, especially as he

aspires to win a national championship with his team.

When Cousins got the phone call from University of Kentucky for his first offer, it was a surreal experience for him. He had been working for such a long time and to make it to a spot where colleges were looking at him as a sophomore meant a lot to him.

Coach James Franklin at Penn State provided a culture that Cousins could not turn down. Even with other offers from University of Kentucky, University of Pittsburgh and University of Wisconsin, his decision was simple. He knew immediately that he wanted to be on a team with what he believes is "the best coach in the country." Cousins already felt a close relationship with the coaching staff and his future teammates before he officially enrolled. "Coach Franklin is like a second father to me now," he says.

Cousins sees going to college early as a benefit to get a head start on continuing his career in football. "You learn a lot more," he says.

Always ready to improve, Cousins has shown that he can overcome setbacks. He said putting on size wasn't always easy, but something a high school prospect needs to do to compete at the Big 10 level. "People either make fun of you or support you, whether you're

“I am so proud to be a small part of his success story.”

~Blayze Myers



Contributed Photo/Penn State University Athletics

too big or too small," says Cousins. But with the support of his coaches and his family, especially his parents, he was able to overcome any setback he ran into.

"I have the best parents on planet earth," he says of his family who will move his cheering section to whatever stadium seats are in their son's future. And since Cousins aspires to go into the NFL, and possibly use his leadership skills as a coach they will likely have many more games in their future.

"I don't say it very often about high school kids, but I think he's got a very bright future at Penn State with an opportunity to get on the field soon, and I do think he's going to be playing in the NFL," says Orlando.

Forever in Millcreek

While Cousins is living his dreams at Penn State he won't forget the memorable experiences he had as a McDowell Trojan.

He says that beating Cathedral Prep twice will forever be a feeling neither he nor his teammates can erase. In the final match-up, the Trojans were the underdogs, but they fought hard and were able to

achieve a win in front of a huge crowd and the MOB.

"It was the best feeling to run up and hug him and celebrate the huge win! I am so glad we got to experience that moment together," says Myers.

But Cousins says he won't just miss Gus Anderson's Friday night lights, but also the community surrounding them. "Millcreek is a great place with great people, and I'm going to miss it," he says.

With this community on his side, he never felt overwhelmed, even when the pressure was on to succeed. He says he loves and appreciates everyone who came to his games and supported him and his teammates.

"I am so proud to be a small part of his success story," says Myers. "I am Cooper's biggest fan and supporter and am blessed to have been his teammate and have him in my life. I look forward to celebrating all his future accomplishments and supporting him every step of the way. We will be friends and teammates forever."

Smooth Out the New Year

by Mckenzie Pauli

Are you looking for a healthier alternative to a milkshake? Is one of your New Year's resolutions to be healthier? If so, here are two delicious smoothie recipes that are easy to make. Both of these recipes can be made all year round and give the fruity and delicious taste that we all know and love.

Tropical Bliss

The Tropical Bliss Smoothie is a mix of mango, pineapple, orange pineapple juice and vanilla yogurt. It tastes very tropical, as if you're relaxing at the beach on a hot summer day. If you don't like pineapple or mango, you can substitute strawberries or another fruit of your choice.

Mckenzie Pauli/The Trojan voice



Ingredients

- ½ cup frozen mango chunks
- ½ cup frozen pineapple chunks
- ½ cup pineapple-orange juice
- ½ cup vanilla yogurt

Instructions

1. In a blender, combine the frozen mango chunks, frozen pineapple chunks and vanilla yogurt
2. Pour in the pineapple-orange juice to add a refreshing citrus twist.
3. Blend all the ingredients until smooth and creamy.
4. Taste the smoothie and adjust the consistency by adding more juice if needed.
5. Pour the tropical bliss smoothie into a glass and enjoy the delicious and tropical flavors!

Berry Banana Delight

The Berry Banana Delight Smoothie is a classic strawberry banana smoothie. It's very simple with only four ingredients. The banana flavor isn't overbearing, but it is still present. Although, if you don't like bananas or strawberries you can substitute it with blueberries or another fruit.

Mckenzie Pauli/The Trojan voice



Ingredients

- ½ cup frozen strawberries
- 1 banana
- ½ cup vanilla yogurt
- ½ cup milk

Instructions

1. Start by adding the frozen strawberries to the blender.
2. Peel and slice the banana, then add it to the blender as well. a frozen banana will become extra smooth.
3. Spoon in the vanilla yogurt for a creamy texture.
4. Pour in the milk to achieve the desired consistency.
5. Blend all the ingredients until smooth and velvety.
6. Taste the smoothie and adjust the sweetness or thickness by adding more yogurt or milk if necessary.
7. Pour the Berry Banana Delight smoothie into a glass and savor anytime of day.

Mind over Muscle

Athletes compete with own mental health

by Havana Austin

In the world of sports, the brain is the master controller of the muscles. It sends signals to make them move and work together. But here's the catch: if we don't take care of our minds, if we neglect how we feel and handle stress, it's like having a controller that's not working right. A healthy mind is just as crucial as a strong body for athletes to perform at their best.

In a survey of 50 people, 72.5% of female high school athletes and 25% of male high school athletes stated that participating in their sport increases their mental health problems. Many of these athletes are struggling with symptoms like anxiety, depression, trouble sleeping and irritability.

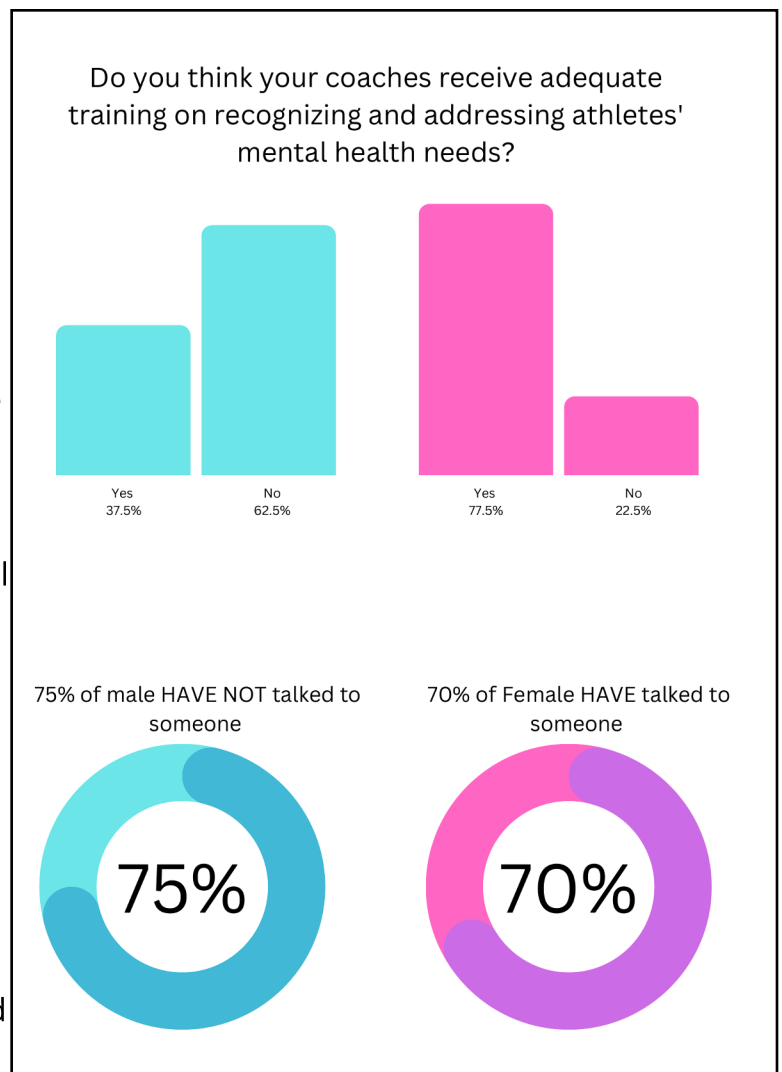
Gracie Miller, a senior at McDowell High School and a softball player, says, "When struggling mentally, it affects you in every aspect of your life, including your performance in your sport." According to the survey, 75% of female and 50% of male athletes agree with what Miller is saying.

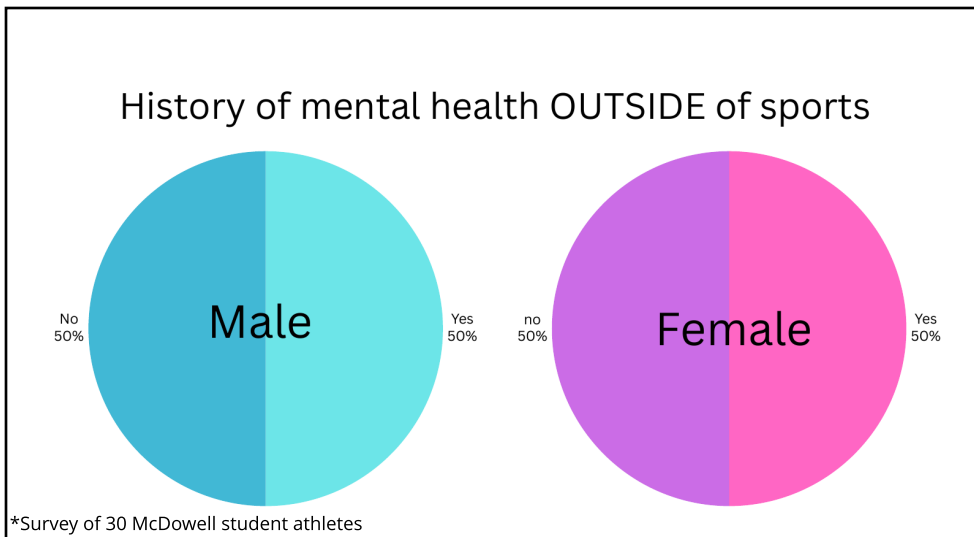
Miller shared a story about an old teammate of hers who struggled with mental health. This teammate "couldn't think about brushing her hair let alone the stress a practice or game brought. She realized the only way she would continue to live and try to get better was to be focused on the positives that most coaches skip right over," Miller said.

In the McDowell survey, 77.5% of females and 62.5% of males do not think coaches receive adequate training on recognizing and addressing athletes' mental health needs.

Miller says a big way coaches could be better at recognizing when an athlete is struggling would be "checking in with players in a one-on-one environment and being observant."

The University of Michigan's student life Counseling and Psychology services say that coaches can start by "help(ing) reduce the stigma of mental health by talking about it and normalizing the need to take care of our minds. Be an ambassador for mental health." It is something that coaches often don't think





about, just observing how an athlete may act during, after and even before a game “can actually tell you a lot about their athletes’ mental health,” says Miller.

The McDowell survey revealed that 70% of female athletes say that talking to someone about what they are feeling has helped their mental health, 67.5% have talked to a family member, 52.5% have talked to a friend and 35% talk to a teammate. Miller says she “uses school counselors, teachers I trust and my mom” when she needs support.

However, it seems boys are a different story. Of those surveyed, 75% of male athletes say that they have not talked to anyone about their mental health needs.

Quinn Zelinski, a high school senior from Virginia Beach, was a former swimmer and track runner says, “Coaches may not actually look down on you for talking about (mental health), but it sure feels like it sometimes. When I was having a hard time with my mental health my coaches didn’t really do anything to help. They just tried to push me more and more and it was just making me feel worse,” Zelinski says.

Zelinski explains that his coaches were always good at recognizing their physical needs. “Whether it is a stretch out day, technique work, a harder practice or more time in the weight room. But when it comes to how we are doing mentally it is something that isn’t brought up,

and it is definitely something that affects how we perform just as much,” he says.

This problem can not be fixed overnight, but there are small steps that athletes can take to help each other and themselves. Some simple signs that coaches, volunteers, teammates and parents can look out for are: decreases in concentration, interest and motivation, a decrease in energy and activity levels with feelings of fatigue or tiredness, negative thinking, low or sad moods, irritability or anger.

If you are an athlete and you think you may be struggling with mental health it is important to first recognize and acknowledge what may be the cause, talk to a professional, they can provide coping strategies and support. You may also need to just take a break. Lack of sleep and overtraining can contribute to stress and impact performance.

Remember that individual responses to stress vary, so it's important to tailor these strategies to your preferences and needs. Creating a culture that values mental health and well-being contributes to a more positive and supportive athletic environment.

Rolling Towards Togetherness

by Grace Tirak

When thinking about McDowell sports football, basketball or baseball might be the first ones that come to mind, but what many people don't know is that unified sports teams are not only athletic options, but are expanding rapidly around the community. These teams combine people with and without intellectual disabilities and creates room for friendship and understanding.

Unified sports at McDowell began about 10 years ago after the Special Olympics reached out to schools about expanding the program. The unified track team at McDowell grew as a huge program, but there were some limitations. There were some students who didn't like running or they simply couldn't. After a lot of consideration, unified bocce

was brought to McDowell as a winter sport last season.

"Bocce is an easier sport for kids because of wheelchairs, the physical abilities and kids who don't like to run," said Melissa Rupp, a McDowell teacher and the unified bocce coach. "I wanted to get more involved with the school and this was just the best opportunity to do it."

Kendell Klapsinos, a senior and a member of the unified bocce team said, "Sometimes the more predominant sports in school or around the community can be too intimidating for students whereas the unified sports teams have a spot for everyone."

Commonly known as a summer yard game, many people aren't aware of how bocce works as a unified sport. Even the fans weren't sure how to behave during the matches. "The crowd doesn't know what to do because it's very different from a sport like track," Rupp said. "I had to go over to the stands and be like, 'Guys, you can cheer! You can yell!'"

McDowell's senior high school helped gain exposure for the team by featuring a game during a school day assembly. "I found it beneficial to gain an idea of what a game of bocce is like. This allowed for the sport to be talked about and gain some traction for

Eric McMahon/The Trojan Voice



At the start of each frame, a player has three attempts to throw a small ball, used as a target, called a pallina.

The team who throws the pallina, also delivers the first bocce ball.



Players throw or roll the ball from or on the four line

Photos by Eric McMahon/The Trojan Voice

recognition," Klapsinos said. Rupp agreed that it was a good idea for it to gain some recognition. "I think that that would be something to do next year. It got people really excited."

Since the whole unified sports programs started because of the Special Olympics, McDowell follows many of its ideas especially "giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community," Rupp said. "Some people just don't have high expectations for people with special needs." Unified bocce puts people on the same team where they can all have fun.

McDowell is working towards inclusion with sports. "This building is big on inclusion and respect and letting these kids be a big part of our school. That's our whole mentality here." The atmosphere around the bocce team is unlike any other. "The coaches, teammates, opposing teams, and spectators are all so positive and welcoming for students that are trying out the sport for the first time or returning. Everyone is constantly having a good time being with their friends and teammates, even if the game gets stressful when it comes to a close score," Klapsinos said.

Klapsinos said being a part of the unified bocce team was a highlight of her school year.



Eric McMahon/The Trojan Voice

"I am so thankful that I decided to join. It may seem intimidating at first, but the team is like a second family, and I have become friends with all of my teammates," she said. If a unified sport sounds like something you would like to be a part of, reach out to Coach Rupp or Coach Veronica Naughton for more information. "Being a part of the teams doesn't mean you have to be the best at what it is, as long as you have fun it is all that matters," Rupp said.

Only one team receives points each frame. The team receives 1-4 points depending on the ball's distance from the pallina.



The team that is rewarded the points is presented with the pallina, and starts the next frame.

Each game goes for 30 minutes, or until the game reaches 16 points, whichever occurs first.



Fitness Influencer not Fit for Youtube

by Matthew DiPlacido

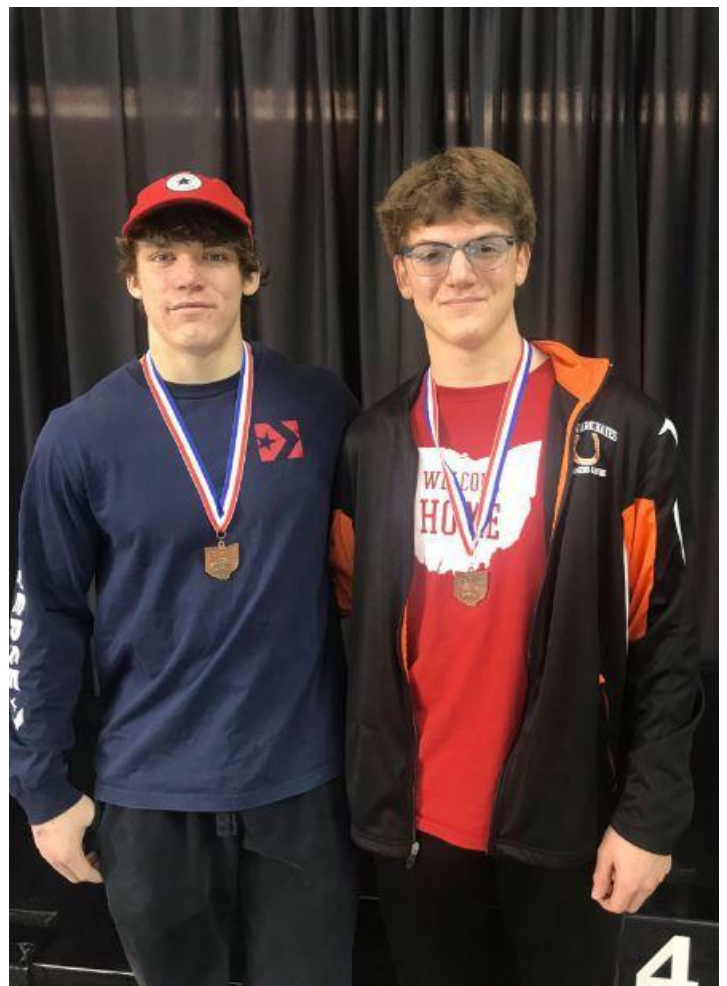
Across the internet, the fitness industry has been generating major waves as brand-new health-related influencers push into the mainstream. Last year, nobody gained as much new-found success as 21-year-old bodybuilder Sam Sulek, who is known for his large amount of muscle mass, and his long, relaxed and genuine YouTube videos. But with many people turning their eyes to bettering their health in the new year, is Sam Sulek really the person we should be looking to for advice?

Sulek's rise to fame has been very sudden despite also being riddled with controversies, most of which relate to his alleged steroid use and unconventional diet. Many followers, when first viewing the young YouTuber's physique, were quick to point out the large amount of acne riddled across his back, face and chest – signs of anabolic steroid use, a drug banned from all major sports organizations that promotes significant muscle growth and enhances physical performance, typically at the risk of the user's health.

Influencers like former pro bodybuilder turned content creator Greg Doucette has made over twenty different videos about Sulek, mainly pertaining to his unwillingness to admit to being on any steroids and how Sulek's teenage marketing demographic is surely comparing their own bodies to someone who achieved their muscles unnaturally. These unhealthy comparisons can heighten the risk of mental disorders, such as body dysmorphia and eating disorders, or worse yet, convince these teenagers to try anabolic steroids for themselves.

The steroid accusations are amplified by Sulek's very unhealthy diet, which he reasons doesn't

matter as long as you stay within your calorie limit and get all the nutrients you need (much of his vitamins come in the form of supplements). On paper, this thinking does check out, however, it is greatly discouraged by both medical and bodybuilding professionals because Sulek's intake of overly processed food, severe amounts of



Sam Sulek YouTube channel

Sam Sulek (left) in high school before his alleged steroid use.

WHAT DOES SAM SULEK EAT IN ONE DAY?

MEAL ONE

- Two liters of chocolate milk
- Approximately 1600 calories



MEAL TWO

- Four cups of Cinnamon Toast Crunch with 4 cups of whole-fat milk
- Approximately 1300 calories



MEAL THREE

- Post-workout protein shake with whole-fat milk
- Approximately 350 calories



MEAL FOUR

- Five Guys Bacon Cheeseburger
- French Fries
- Approximately 1700 calories



MEAL FIVE

- Four glazed Krispy Kreme Donuts
- Four cups of whole-fat milk
- Approximately 1400 calories



Sam Sulek YouTube channel

Sam Sulek poses in one of his YouTube videos after a back workout

saturated fats, and awe-inducing portions of sugar can affect energy levels, vitamin intake and overall long-term health.

Despite all of these supposed flaws in Sulek's training, there are valid reasons to follow the young fitness prospect. Many fans, such as myself, are large supporters of the long-form, unedited videos Sulek posts daily where his humble and relaxed demeanor shines through the 30 -to 40-minute long posts. Some

enjoy Sulek's preaching of high-intensity training, reminiscent of old-school styled bodybuilding. And, nearly all of his fan base find common ground in their support when it comes to Sulek's support of mental health and guidance through issues that may arrive as his subscribers grow older.

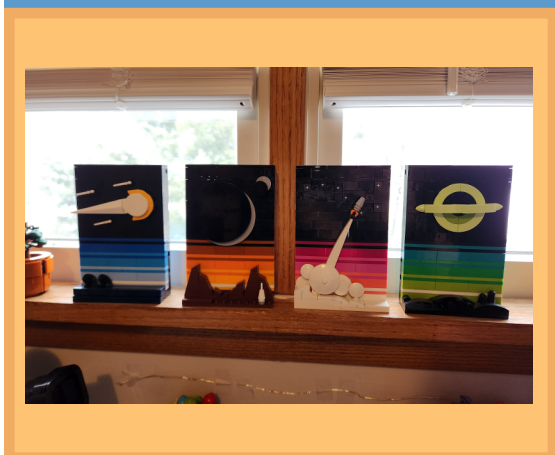
So, Sulek should be taken with a grain of salt. His personality and aesthetic makes him a wonderful influencer for his audience, however, the fitness advice he shares may cause harm or false expectations for anyone listening who doesn't know right from wrong. Viewers beware.

OPINION

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR A NEW YEAR

WHY HAVE LEGOs GOTTEN EXPENSIVE AND ARE THEY WORTH BUYING?

Story and Photos by
Emmaleigh Dorau



LEGO lovers have lots to be excited about in 2024 as the company plans to release 300 building block sets, including the long-awaited Animal Crossing series in March and the Polaroid Camera which came out already. Though these sets have been long-awaited, many might get stuck on the sticker shock.

Why are LEGOs expensive?

To begin, LEGO prides itself on high quality products, meaning the cost of production to construct one LEGO set is expensive. Since 1973, LEGO bricks have been made out of a high quality plastic called Acrylonitrile Butadiene Styrene (ABS). This material is very strong as a 1:1 LEGO brick can take up to 90 pounds of force to break.

LEGO has also partnered with large franchises such as Harry Potter and Star Wars to expand their variety of sets. This raises the price of production considering specific licenses are needed to construct and sell each set.

After the pandemic, inflation in the United States has increased significantly on everything, including the plastic blocks. With LEGO spending more to create the sets as well as transport them, it causes consumers to deal with higher prices per set. Since 2022, the prices on LEGO sets have grown between 4% and 25%.

Are LEGOs worth the price?

With a wide range of sets offered, LEGO prices can range from \$4.99 to \$679. Despite the increasing prices, LEGO sets are worth the prices they sell for.

To begin, LEGOs are considered a good time killer. During winter, many people prefer to stay inside to avoid the cold temperatures and the snow, more than likely leaving them bored. The time to complete a set varies as an easier LEGO set can take anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes to complete, whereas a more complex set can take anywhere from a day to a week.

Second, no matter what fandom you are a part of, there is a LEGO set out there for you. With three major drops announced for 2024 so far, there will be more variety to be added to the bricks. These include new Disney sets, the Animal Crossing sets in March and a large family tree set in February. Newer sets also have interesting features. The Disney 100 Camera released in November 2023 for example, has a cranking feature, a door which opens on the side letting you see inside the camera and you can even switch between lenses.

Finally, LEGOs are a unique item to display. For example, if you were to build the botanical collection, you can put a variety of flowers in a vase to create a vibrant bouquet in your home that won't ever wither. Having a complex LEGO set on display, such as the Star Wars Millennium Falcon, can shock people as you've achieved a large accomplishment by completing it. LEGOs may not be for everyone, but next time you go to Walmart, why not pick up a new set, build it and put it somewhere visible. This childhood hobby can continue into adulthood, in fact, LEGO is banking on it.