Honors Program in Foreign Languages and High School Athletics
By Casey Atchley, León, Spain 2005

Participating in a high school sport and maintaining off-season training can certainly be a demanding task. Similarly, traveling to a foreign country to live with a host family and study a language is no piece of cake. With the help of the IUHPFL and a lot of self-discipline, however, the two assignments can actually complement each other.

Upon learning that I would participate in the IU Honors Program in Foreign Languages (IUHPFL), my excitement was met with certain concerns. One of the challenges was going to be my ability to maintain the training necessary to compete in my upcoming senior season of cross country and track. It was easy to picture myself with little time to train alone in a strange city while my teammates back home were training together five days a week. My coach, my host family and my professors and peers in the Honors Program, however, were integral in making sure that this was never an issue.

I entered Spain with a detailed packet. Written by my coach, it was to serve as my training instruction and log for the entire trip. To my surprise, many of my Honors Program peers (some of whom I had unknowingly competed against on the track) were sent off with similar instructions from their respective coaches. During the first week of classes, the program's professors and staff were extremely helpful in the search for a time and a place where we could train together.

Attempting to join a gym using only Spanish would be something I would look forward to today. At the time, though, it sounded like a nightmare! The Honors Program staff helped us find a gym near the University, assisted us in the sign-up
process and were even able to secure us a group discount on our weekly fee. The professors helped in the same process for student athletes that needed swimming pools and tennis courts. Finally, we were all given time, each weekday, by our instructors and host families to use the facilities to train. By choice, we spent most weekdays on treadmills and many weekends running outdoors.

There were two aspects of going to the daily workouts that were key to my transition into the culture and my study of Spanish. First, I had not previously realized how important (to my body and mind) my daily running time was. It was the one part of my day in Spain that felt like a day in Indiana. I ran every day at home – I ran every day in Spain. It was a time to decompress, do something familiar and process the day's lessons and events. The consistency in the training and daily routine definitely helped my adjustment. Second, it was a social time (in Spanish, of course) with my Honors Program peers away from the instructors. We were learning and practicing Spanish, but not in the typical classroom setting. While training, we would talk about running, about Indiana cross-country meets and about our favorite sports teams at home and in Europe – all in Spanish. Those conversations were practical, every-day-life situations where we could use what we had learned in the classroom.

In addition to the running, I was fortunate to have a very sports-oriented host father. Every weekend, if not traveling, we were doing something outside – tennis, camping, swimming, pick-up soccer, beach volleyball – you name it. Toward the end of the program my host family and I camped on the beach for an entire weekend. One morning of the camping trip, I awoke early to run alone on the beach. That run, on a beautiful rural beach in Northern Spain, has got to be one of the best runs I've
ever been on. It remains one of the first moments I think about upon being reminded of the trip. Staying active with my host family and living in such a walking-friendly city helped both my adjustment to Spain and my goal to stay in shape.

The catch, however, is that it is easier said than done. Though I had training partners and instructors that were willing to find a time and a place for me, it was largely up to myself to actually do the running. Until that summer, I had always had a coach instructing me about when, where and how to run. Though they can send you off with a packet, your coach cannot follow you to Spain. It is your own self-discipline that is ultimately necessary to train the way that your teammates are training back home. What this did for me, though, is that upon finishing high school, I was able to continue training on my own because I had experienced being without a coach. Currently, I race for a cycling team. Though we have a coach, my year-round training plan is up to me to perform. I am positive that my experience running in Spain built the discipline that I have to use now to work out on my own.

If your desire and need to maintain training or practice your sport is there, IUHPFL will help you find a way to do it. It is likely, in fact, that you’re not the only one in your group with that challenge. As an athlete, it is a great way to get to know the others in your program and have a consistent routine that keeps you tied to home. Participating in a high school sport shouldn’t keep you from the Summer of your life, it should be a part of it!