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### Gardner-Webb Student-Athlete Redefines Autism

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## BULLDOG PROFILES

## Gardner-Webb Student-Athlete Redefines Autism

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON APRIL 20, 2022



▲ Cole Ray, center, runs in a race at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, S.C. Photo by Robin Jackson / GWU Photo Staff

## Cole Ray—Writer, Runner, Teammate and Friend—Shares His Story for Autism Awareness and Acceptance Month

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—When Cole Ray runs, he describes the experience as a feeling of fulfillment. A Gardner-Webb University track and field student-athlete, his goal for every competition is to beat his own personal record (PR). His favorite track event is the 1,500 meter. When he runs cross country, he prefers the 3-mile race.

Whatever the activity, he strives for improvement. “I’m proud of each PR and my most recent one,” shared Cole, a rising senior. “The next goal is to beat my previous record.”

Cole has been breaking records—and stereotypes—all his life. He was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum when he was 5 years old. His parents, Rod and Merritt Ray, said when that happened, they didn’t know much about autism. “So we embarked on a journey to learn as much as we could as fast as we could,” Rod informed. “This mission became a family project. We sought out the best therapies and schools that we could find. Our goal was to leave no rock unturned.”

*“Being on the autism spectrum doesn’t define you. You could never really tell to look at me that I have autism, could you?”*

*Cole Ray, student-athlete*



▲ Cole Ray and his Dad, Rod, pose at a track meet at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, S.C. Photo by Robin Jackson / GWU Photo Staff

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When the family learned that physical activity, while beneficial for everyone, is especially helpful for individuals on the autism spectrum, they provided Cole plenty of opportunities for exercise. Rod, a tennis coach at Wofford College in Spartanburg, S.C., began running with Cole. Cole reflected that he enjoyed running with his Dad and competing in triathlons. Additionally, Cole became proficient in karate and swimming. He also joined the Boy Scouts and earned the rank of Eagle Scout.

While April is observed internationally as Autism Awareness and Acceptance Month (<https://gardner-webb.edu/news/autism-awareness-and-acceptance-month/>), Cole offers a daily reminder for the GWU community. “Being on the autism spectrum doesn’t define you,” he stated. “You could never really tell to look at me that I have autism, could you?”

Track and Field (<https://gwusports.com/sports/track-and-field>). Coach Brian Baker said Cole’s determination and hard work motivates his teammates. “They cheer for him and get excited when he races,” he observed. “Cole being on the team has opened their eyes to there’s more to athletics than winning. It’s about perseverance for each person, and everyone has goals in life they want to accomplish. He grounds them.”

Cole, an English major, said he chose to attend Gardner-Webb before he knew he had a spot on the track and field team. “It’s a really great place, great teachers, and a great Noel Center, as well,” he acknowledged.

He said the Noel Center for Disability Resources (<https://gardner-webb.edu/resources/academic-support/noel-center/>) has helped him with writing, scheduling, balancing anxieties and developing social skills. His professors are also helpful and approachable. They answer his questions and are available outside of class. Two of his favorite courses are visual rhetoric and history.



▲ Cole Ray runs in the race at Winthrop.  
Photo courtesy of the Ray family.

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Cole's parents appreciate everyone who has helped their son achieve his academic and athletic goals. "Many things appealed to us about Gardner-Webb," Rob and Merritt affirmed. "First of all, it was evident to us on our first visit that Gardner-Webb has many fine and intelligent people who have a desire to be helpful to others. We also were impressed with the Noel Center and the many great people who work there. He enjoys going there and has grown in confidence due to their good work and friendship. The Noel Center's social group has been an important part of Cole's experience. Michelle Wallen (accessibly advisor) and Robin Weaver (assistant dean) have done an outstanding job of providing guidance, direction, and tools that have equipped Cole to be successful."

They continued, "Additionally, Coach Brian Baker and the cross-country team have had a significant impact on Cole's success. He's had an enjoyable experience on the team and has found friendship and encouragement in this space."

*Gardner-Webb University is North Carolina's recognized leader in private, Christian higher education. A Carnegie-Classified Doctoral/Professional University, GWU is home to six professional schools, 14 academic departments, more than 80 undergraduate and graduate majors, and a world-class faculty. Located on a beautiful 225-acre campus in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb prepares graduates to impact their chosen professions, equips them with the skills to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and inspires them to make a positive and lasting difference in the lives of others. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.*