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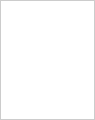
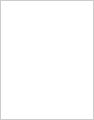
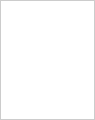
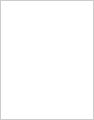
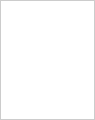
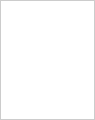
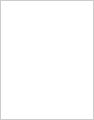
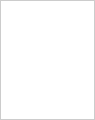
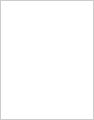
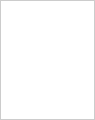
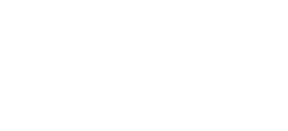


Red Sox 10, Braves 7, 9th inning

**Community college sports an**

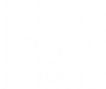
**endangered but essential species**

**By Zolan Kanno-Youngs** Globe Correspondent, July 6, 2015, 6:02 p.m.



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The Roxbury Community College men’s basketball team at the start of the 2014-15 season. ROXBURY COMMUNITY COLLEGE



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It is late February and the Roxbury Community College men’s basketball team is minutes away from playing Bristol Community College in the first round of the National Junior College Athletic Association regional tournament.

Roxbury coach Kwami Green gathers his team for a pregame speech and urges each player to consider his mother.

“I want you to play as if someone is attacking her,’’ Green says. “You got to protect her.’’

Then Green writes a message on the board: “Play for Alex.”

Alex DoSouto was Roxbury’s starting guard until he was fatally shot the month before.

Another Roxbury guard walks to the board and writes, “Play for Kris Cook.”

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# BOSTON GLOBE VIDEO



2:23

Baker announces ‘VaxM SHARE

Cook played for Roxbury in 2013 and 2014, before he was shot to death last December.

The moment underscored the important personal connections sports at the state’s community colleges can provide. Roxbury players and others like them across Massachusetts embody the hopes of struggling student-athletes pursuing their last chance of a college education.



Governor Charlie Baker announced residents who are

fully vaccinated against COVID-19 will have the chance to win $1 million in a special Lottery sweepstakes. (Photo by Matt Stone/Boston Herald via AP)

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For decades, the state’s community college system has helped save legions of vulnerable young men and women from the dangers of the streets and the limitations of life without higher education.

Now, community college sports in Massachusetts may themselves be at risk. Squeezed by budget concerns and the public’s generally negative perception of the potential value, six of the state’s community college’s already have eliminated their athletic programs.

“With the difficulties in the economy that we’re starting to see more and more, it’s definitely a concern with the schools that are currently active,” said Khari Roulhac, the president of the Massachusetts Community College Athletic Conference.

Roulhac can remember a time when all 15 community colleges in the state had athletic programs. But Greenfield CC, Cape Cod CC, Middlesex CC, Mount Wachusett CC, North Shore CC and Berkshire CC have all been forced to cut their teams.

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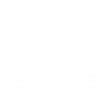
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Roulhac and athletic directors around the state fear that list will soon grow.

“There is always a threat that athletics could go the way of the dinosaur,” says Bill Raynor, athletic director at Massachusetts Bay Community College.

As tuition costs at four-year schools skyrocket and the chances of securing Division 1 athletic scholarships remain remote, community colleges offer students an affordable two years to improve their academics and athletics and apply for scholarships and other financial aid to continue their higher education.



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For some players – those without resources, a supportive family, and a safe environment – those two years can make all the difference.

Mark Leszcyk, 51, who has guided the Roxbury women’s basketball team to three national championship games, cites the Stewart twins, Amanda and Alyssa, who bounced among four different foster homes before they landed at community college.

He also notes the success of Tyler Parker-Kimball, an All-American at Roxbury, who now is pursuing a master’s degree at Northeastern University.

“I always tell my girls, it’s not the hand you’re dealt that matters, it’s how you choose to play the cards,” Leszczyk says. “A lot of them are given bad hands.”

The financial feasibility of community college ranks among its greatest appeals. Tuition for one semester at Roxbury Community College costs

$3,912, compared to $27,293 at a private, non-profit four-year school, according to the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center.



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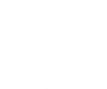
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“You can look at the glass half empty or half full, but if you are not getting a scholarship to some private university, the best way to go is this way,” Green says. “Somebody who needs as much help as possible could get it at Roxbury.”

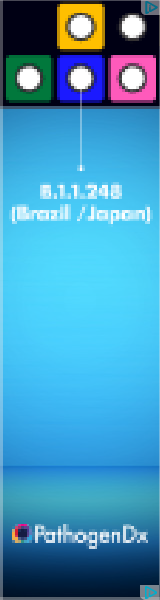
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Roulhac said until people realize the potential value, the athletic will always be at risk.

“There’s got to be a value change to people throughout the commonwealth, including the legislature,” Roulhac said. “They need to recognize the value and the demographic that needs athletics. That it has proven to attract these students and keep them on the right path.”

Over the past 10 years, the MassBay men’s basketball team has helped 39 of 87 players earn associate degrees from the school. Eleven other players have transferred to four-year institutions.



At Roxbury, the women’s basketball program has sent 22 players to four- year universities since 2008, while 11 players from the men’s program have transferred to four-year institutions.

UMass Amherst gives preference to prospective transfers from all community colleges in the state with excellent academic records, through the “MassTransfer” program. Notable among those who have benefited is Paris Amado, once an at-risk high school student.

Amado was a senior guard at Quincy High School in 2008 when he was charged with possession and distribution of a class B and D substance. He said the school suspended him from September to December and called him a “detriment to society.”

After missing four months of school, Amado thought he had run out of options. But he was not convicted of the charges, and his mother encouraged him to go back to high school.

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“It was just a hard time in my life because I only had my mother in my corner at the time,” Amado says. “I just felt like it was over for me.”

Enter Green. The Roxbury coach invited Amado to continue playing the game he loves and further his education. Amado attended mandatory study halls at Roxbury three days a week. He completed his two-year program with a GPA higher than 3.0 and was named to the NJCAA All-Academic team.

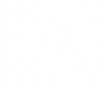
His performance at Roxbury catapulted him to UMass Amherst, where he received a bachelor’s degree in sociology in 2013. He now works at the Washington Urban Middle School in Roslindale as a behavior specialist, trying to prevent others from faltering in high school.

“I don’t know if I would be in the streets, locked up or dead [if not for attending Roxbury]”, Amado says. “With the road I was going on, community college was the perfect place for me to go.’’

For DoSouto, who grew up in Dorchester’s volatile Bowdoin-Geneva neighborhood, the road to Roxbury Community College began after he transitioned out of gang life, survived a shooting, and managed to earn a diploma from Boston English High School.

A city All-Star, he had received offers to play small-college basketball, but his career was cut short when he was convicted in 2009 of committing a felony in his prior gang life. Rather than leave Dorchester for college, he began a two-year prison sentence for an armed robbery in Quincy.

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After prison, DoSouto connected with Roxbury’s assistant coach, Claude Pritchard. Pritchard and Green gave DoSouto a second chance, and he embraced it.

His sister, Christina DoSouto, said Alex saw college as a way to pursue his passion for basketball and rise above the violence that had claimed so many of his friends.

“He wanted to make us a proud,” she says.

On Jan. 8, he became Boston’s first homicide victim of 2015.



The Roxbury men’s basketball team showed off its t-shirts in memory of teammate Alex DoSouto after Roxbury won a regional tournament. ROXBURY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

DoSouto was not the only community college player who has fallen to the violence he strived to escape. Cook’s former girlfriend, Mariana Avila, said he grew up hard in San Diego, selling drugs and hanging with a dangerous crowd.

Cook fared well for a year at Roxbury before he returned home to recuperate from a knee injury.

“When he came [to RCC], he was away from home, away from all the BS, so all he had to focus on was school and basketball,” Avila says. “When he went back, it was back to square one.”

Cook was visiting a cousin in Arkansas last December when an intruder shot and killed him. He was 22.

“His goal was to go to a four-year college,” says Charlie Nedd-Araujo, an RCC basketball player who recently finished his two years at the college and plans to transfer to a four-year school.

The Stewart twins harbor similar aspirations. Like DoSouto and Cook, they endured difficult childhoods. They say their mother was immersed in Hartford street life, amid drugs and violence, as they bounced from foster home to foster home.

“That’s what the streets can do to you,” Alyssa says. “The streets can take you in and there’s no coming back sometimes.”

Without their mother’s blessing, the twins applied to RCC. “We just didn’t want to be in the same situation we were in,” Alyssa says.

The twins are banking on college basketball serving as a springboard to a better life, which pleases advocates of strong community college systems. Students committed to staying academically eligible for athletics often perform better in the classroom.

“We should be looking for every conceivable way to connect with these kids and motivate them to stay in school,” says former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, who teaches political science at Northeastern and the University of California at Los Angeles.

Improving the public’s perception of community colleges would help, says MassBay’s Raynor.

“We look at community colleges in the east as dumping grounds for the underachiever,” Raynor says. “If we can begin to change that perception and have not just students but parents take advantage of this option it would serve them well.”

For some, community college is a lifesaver – if only for too short a time. On Mariana Avila’s last visit with Cook in San Diego, she remembers him repeatedly expressing his eagerness to return to Roxbury and embrace his second chance.

“Honestly, if it wasn’t for RCC I don’t know what I would be doing with myself right now,” she remembers him saying.

Follow Zolan Kanno-Youngs on Twitter at @kannoyoungs.

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