

London provides international case study for sports' community impact

ASU students visit city's hallowed venues before inaugural Union Jack Classic football game as part of study abroad opportunity

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
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In athletics, you win or lose — or maybe draw, depending on the sport. But right now, for Sebastian Dowd-Smith, it is all win, win, win.

Dowd-Smith is among 16 students participating in Arizona State University's London Sports Event study abroad program, where he is visiting some of the city's most revered sports venues, getting a behind-the-scenes look at what goes into large-scale sporting events, and volunteering at events leading up to the inaugural Union Jack Classic, where the ASU Sun Devils will take on the Kansas Jayhawks in the first-ever Division I college football game played in the United Kingdom on Sept. 19.

On game day, he'll be in the stands, watching history unfold.

The experience is giving Dowd-Smith, who is pursuing a degree in parks, recreation and sport management, a new perspective on the relationship between sports and community identity. In London, he has seen how deeply fans connect with their teams and how that connection shapes the experience of attending a game.

He's been impressed by how the various venues he's visited accommodate large, raucous crowds; but it is the fans' intensity that has really surprised him.

"The fans in London are some of the most passionate and enthusiastic fans I have ever seen," he said. "In terms of the fan bases, my first thought was that it makes some of the U.S.'s biggest rivalries — such as Yankees and Red Sox or Celtics and Lakers — look like absolute nothing. Every win matters, especially when relegation to move up or down in leagues is on the line."

The study abroad program is led by faculty [Eric Legg](#) and [Erin Schneiderman](#), who teach sport and event management courses in the [School of Community Resources and Development](#), part of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

Legg and Schneiderman built the program around the ASU football game, working backward to create opportunities for students to make connections between sports and community development, cultural impact and large-scale events, such as the Olympics and Paralympics.

The students are also gaining hands-on experience in event management while in London. Many of the students are pursuing an event management minor. Several students volunteered at ASU Foundation pregame events, helping with check-in and wayfinding. And the entire group will be working at the tailgate before the big game, assisting the ASU Alumni Association with the event.

As part of the study abroad program, students toured Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, home to the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics, and took a cycling lesson at Lee Valley VeloPark within the Olympic complex. They also attended a Premier League match between Crystal Palace and Ipswich Town, visited the All England Lawn Tennis Club — home of Wimbledon — and tried their hands at cricket at Lord's Cricket Ground and Museum.

Additionally, students met with a community sport youth organization to compare the program with youth sport management in the United States.

Other quintessential London sights, including the Changing of the Guard ceremony and Tower of London, were sprinkled throughout the trip. Some students caught a show at London Theatre Week, giving them a chance to explore a large-scale event focused on the arts.

The trip's overarching goal is for students to understand how sport contributes to communities beyond fandom, Legg said.

"What I hope students realize is the impact sports have around the world. We're seeing that at different levels and in different ways — from American football as a marketing tool for ASU London to the community pride and identity surrounding Premier League teams," he said.

The city's sports culture made an impression on Dowd-Smith, who is interested in a career in professional sports. Along with a couple of classmates, he dropped by a West Ham United Champions League match. He was particularly impressed by London Stadium, the team's home turf and the site of the 2012 Olympics opening and closing ceremonies.

"Visiting London's iconic sports venues, especially London Stadium, reinforced the importance of clearly defined values in delivering an elite, memorable experience for both athletes and fans," he said. "I have learned a lot of important characteristics from these venues that I will carry into creating the memorable experiences that made me fall in love with sports in the first place."

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Friday: [ASU London students jump in with a multi-day hackathon](#)

Saturday: [Super fans and festivities at the Union Jack Classic](#)

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Sebastian Dowd-Smith (left) and two classmates on the London Sports Event Experience study abroad trip flash the Forks Up hand sign at a West Home United match in London Stadium. Photo courtesy of Erin Schneiderman/ASU

Text image(s)



ASU students and faculty who are in London to learn about sports culture and event management pose with the Union Jack Classic trophy in front of Tower Bridge. Photo courtesy of Erin Schneiderman/ASU