

Gators' junior shoots for the moon

Seton Keough junior Sarah Balles has a demanding course load, is a standout runner and a member of other school organizations.

One project she's involved in, however, has her dealing with things out of this world – literally.

Balles was selected for a special program with the Center for Lunar Science and Exploration, a division of the Lunar and Planetary Institute in Houston. The program gives students the opportunity to conduct original research projects on the moon for NASA.

"It's basically giving us background on the moon and we're doing research about it," Balles said. "It's a good experience because I might want to go into aerospace engineering. It's just cool to research about the moon."

Seton Keough is one of only 16 high schools in the nation chosen for the project.

Balles has managed to earn a 4.06 GPA while taking AP and honors course. Balles is an engineering student as well as a member of Project Lead the Way.

Balles has also run cross country and both indoor and outdoor track for the Gators since she was a freshman. She had been the member of a running club that trained for a 5K run while in middle school, and figured she might as well continue to run while in high school.

"It's just really relaxing," she said. "You can go on a long run whenever you want, and when you come back you're stress free. I also like how in the running community, everyone is so nice and supportive."

As relaxing as it is, Balles is determined to improve her times with every run – whether in practice or at an actual competition.

"I always want to break my previous time – that's really motivating," Balles said. "I also try to pace better for the team so we can get more points. I try and see how much I can improve every race."

Louis Foudos, who coaches all the running sports at Seton Keough, has seen her steadily improve throughout the years.

“Her freshman year she was probably doing 15 minutes for the 2-mile which is OK, but not a noticeable time,” Foudos said. “She now runs it 12:25, so she’s definitely improved quite a bit.

“She’s in the upper tier of the league now. She’s been running over the summer and over the break. She’s a very motivated girl who wants to do well and wants to get better. She knows that if she wants to improve she has to get out there and work hard.”

Her achievements have not gone unnoticed. Balles was all-Interscholastic Athletic Association of Maryland B Conference for cross country in 2011. She also received several Gators’ team awards.

Because of Balles’ strong work ethic, Foudos said she has a legitimate shot at several school records.

“She’s just a great kid to work with,” he said. “She’s there every day, she’s motivated, excited and she never makes any excuses about anything. She finds time to run – she makes goals and they continue to build upon themselves. I just tell her what she needs to do to get better and she goes out there and she does it.”

Balles, a parishioner of St. Joseph, Odenton, also finds time to participate in other activities at school. She is the corresponding secretary with the student council and a member of the stage crew with the theater club.