

A+ Education Learning Fun

Participants in the Mount Vernon Children's Theatre Showcase, created by 55 fifth grade students at Mount Vernon Woods, Woodley Hills, Hollin Meadows, Woodlawn and Hybla Valley Elementary Schools.



Photo by Louise Krafft/Gazette

Mount Vernon Gazette ● Camps & Schools

Impact of Concussions

Cognitive baseline testing protects student athletes from getting back on the field too quickly after a blow to the head.

By Jon Roetman

West Potomac linebacker Matthew Voltmer ended up on the ground on Aug. 14 and he doesn't remember how he got there.

It was a morning session during two-a-day practices at the high school in Mount Vernon, and the Wolverines were engaged in a hitting drill. A collision was the culprit, but Voltmer is uncertain of the details.

"I think we collided heads. To be honest, I don't remember the actual collision," Voltmer said. "I remember being about three feet away and then, next thing I know, I'm on my knees in front of him."

The junior got up, shook his head and got back in the drill.

Later that afternoon, between practices, Voltmer was watching TV when he realized the screen appeared brighter than usual. He didn't feel right, but he loves football and wanted to return for the team's second practice.

His mother had different ideas.

A teammate had informed Voltmer's mother of the hit her son took earlier in the day. After shining a light in his eyes and getting no response in his pupils, sign of a potential concussion, she took Voltmer to the hospital. Doctors performed a CAT scan and found a small bruise on his brain.

If Voltmer needed additional reason for not returning to the field promptly, it came three days later, when he took the ImPACT test.

IMPACT IS A SOFTWARE program geared toward managing the harmful effects of a concussion, including keeping an athlete off the field until he or she is fully recovered. Sustaining a second blow to the head while suffering from an initial concussion can cause second-impact syndrome, which is potentially fatal. According to the ImPACT Website, second-impact syndrome has led to 30-40 deaths in the last 10 years.

ImPACT provides a baseline by measuring cognitive functioning through a series of recognition tests



Matthew Voltmer and Dustin Hess, both junior linebackers on the West Potomac football team, suffered concussions in this year's preseason practices.

administered on a computer. Once a baseline is established, the test can be taken again for comparative purposes if an athlete has suffered a possible concussion. Data from the second test can help lead to a diagnosis and track recovery.

Voltmer had established a baseline when he took the test as a freshman. Two years later, the results from his second test showed a decrease in the quality brain function. Voltmer said he remembered most of what the test entailed from his freshman year, and noticed himself struggling at times when he took it a second time.

"Every single subject was lower, reaction time, memory, [performance on] everything was much worse than my baseline," Voltmer said. He sat out for about two weeks and missed the season opener against Mount Vernon.

Teammate Dustin Hess, also a junior

linebacker, experienced dizziness and ringing in his ears after an Aug. 17 hit during practice. He continued to participate, but after a second blow later in the evening, he decided it was time to tell someone.

"I was feeling [dizzy] after impact, but I didn't report it until the evening because I thought I'd be all right," Hess said. "Then I came out here and practiced and I hit myself again and that was the last string. I couldn't see straight."

Hess, who also established a baseline with ImPACT testing during his freshman year, took the test two days later and produced diminished results. He also missed practice for two weeks and did not play against Mount Vernon.

Hess said waiting to report his symptoms was "stupid" and he would not try to play through symptoms if

they occurred in the future.

EVERY HIGH SCHOOL in Fairfax County uses ImPACT testing to protect student athletes with possible concussions. Jon Almquist, athletic training program administrator for FCPS, said ImPACT provides information unattainable by the naked eye or a standard evaluation. But Almquist added ImPACT is only part of the solution in terms of managing concussions.

Almquist said schools dial 911 if convulsions or vomiting is associated with a head impact. Otherwise, athletes are given a sideline exam and monitored after a head injury to determine down which path he or she is headed. Will the athlete be able to go home after the event, or will he or she be in need of further medical attention?

A full clinical evaluation is another tool, Almquist said.

An ImPACT test would likely be given 24 to 72 hours after head trauma, to test how the brain is functioning.

"I think we collided heads. To be honest, I don't remember the actual collision,"

— Matthew Voltmer, West Potomac linebacker

"It's a tool in our tool box," Almquist said of ImPACT. "No one thing across the board is the answer. ... Everything has to be together. It's kind of like parts of a formula."

Almquist said the number of concussions recorded during the past 15 years is "much higher" than in the past, due primarily to a better understanding of concussions among medical personnel.

WEST POTOMAC head football coach Eric Henderson said he suffered at least 12 concussions during his football career at Fort Hunt High School and the University of Rhode Island. Henderson, who played left tackle at URI, said fighting through concussion symptoms was commonplace 20 years ago.

"I remember blacking out in a game and playing in the second half. That's

what you did: 'Oh, he's awake?' A little ammonia capsule under the nose and 'OK, there no visible blood. I think he can go back in.' That's how it was. But it was 1987."

DR. JILLIAN SCHNEIDER of Spring-

field, a clinical pediatric neuropsychologist who works with ImPACT, said convincing an athlete to stay off the field while recovering from a concussion can be "challenging."

"If they talk about the importance of getting back on the field even though

they're experiencing symptoms, ... I'll emphasize if they have another [head] injury [while recovering], their symptoms are going to be worse and they might miss a season instead of a game."

Rest is the best way to recover

from a concussion, Schneider said. Patients should stay away from physical activity, which she described as anything that elevates the heart rate, and should limit cognitive stress, such as reading and studying, she said.

"Now, the kids are so educated on head injuries that they almost become self advocates, which is good."

— Eric Henderson, football coach

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If They Build It, Will You Come?

Private schools are making big investments in new facilities.

By Julia O'Donoghue
The Connection

The playground is the only aspect of The Potomac School's new lower school facility that people need to hear about to understand how fabulous the latest addition to the sprawling 90-acre education campus in McLean is.

Through a \$50 million fund-raising campaign, the private school was able to upgrade its upper school in 2008 and to build a new lower school that opened this September. Tuition at the upper school costs \$28,925 annually; tuition at the lower school is \$24,765.

Originally constructed in 1959, the lower school building was outdated and had high operating costs. The upper school facility, which houses students in ninth through 12th grades, was too small, said Dabney Schmitt, Potomac's director of development.

"We are so fortunate as an independent school to have a community that understands that because we are an independent school, we have to rely on ourselves for funding. Whatever we do here depends on everyone working together," said Schmitt.

POTOMAC is only one of several local private schools that are in the midst of fundraising for or have recently completed a major construction project, though the private school officials have said they are not in an "arms race" when it comes to building new facilities.

"We are not going to engage in some sort of competition to build the biggest and the best but we are going to put resources where they belong," said Jean Erstling, director of communications at Landon School, which costs \$28,826 per year for the high school program in Bethesda, Md.

Many local private school administrators insist the quality of teaching, curriculum and overall mentality of the school are much more important to perspective students and families than the campus or physical plant.

"I don't know if our facilities give us an advantage over any other school because it is usually a matter of which school is the right fit for the student. This area is fortunate to have some of the best independent and public schools in the

country and it is about where you feel comfortable. There are many schools with terrific facilities," said Rev. William George, president of Georgetown Preparatory School, which costs \$25,650 to attend as day student and \$44,000 to attend as a boarding student in North Bethesda, Md.

FOR SOME SCHOOL COMMUNITIES, their location and natural landscape are more of a draw for families and add more value than any new facility could.

Burgundy Farm Country Day School in the Mount Vernon area, which costs between \$20,000 and \$22,000 per year to attend, employs a lot of experiential learning and their students are outside, rather than in a classroom, for much of the day.

"We have a pond and a stream. The school is fairly rural setting in the middle of an urban area," said Connie Rue, head of the school's lower school program.

Rue added that she thinks the physical setting, a converted dairy farm only a few minutes away from the City of Alexandria, is what attracts some families to Burgundy Farm.

"Parents have said that what they were seeking for their children is a chance to enjoy the outdoors while they are at school, to enjoy the physical setting as part of the classroom," she said.

Burgundy Farm also owns a property in West Virginia that all students in grades first-through-eight use for a three-day overnight learning experience twice per year.

In some cases, students learning about colonial America will go camping on the West Virginia property, with only those resources early settlers would have available to them. Students also do an exercise where they pretend to be on the Underground Railroad that transported slaves from southern states to northern states before the American Civil War, said Rue.

MANY OF THE ELITE schools are competing for the same group of students, children who are not only high-achievers but also have families with the means to volunteer and financially contribute to the school above and beyond tuition rates that frequently exceed \$25,000 per year.

Shortly after Georgetown Prep opened its new athletic center in 2007, Landon launched a fundraising effort for major renovations to their sports complex. The two all-boys schools with campuses only a few miles apart from each other and have a heated sports rivalry.

Georgetown Prep's \$23 million athletic



Photo by Louise Krafft/Connection

The bell rings at the end of the last class of the day at the Potomac School in McLean and the students move into the bus lot for the ride home.

center includes an 11-lane indoor pool, Montgomery County's only regulation-size 200-meter indoor track and a 950-seat basketball arena.

This winter, Prep will also open a student center and new library facility that cost approximately \$30 million to build. The school spent total of \$70 million on their capital campaign.

Now, Landon is pursuing similar types of projects, though on a more modest scale than Georgetown Prep.

"We looked at the majority of student facilities on campus and what needed to be done to improve them," she said.

SOME SCHOOLS are also engaging in building projects not just to renovate or update facilities but to add completely new features to the school and curriculum. The Langley School, which runs from preschool to eighth grade and costs approximately \$25,000, opened its first ever arts center on its McLean campus.

Most schools only have their immediate community of parents, grandparent and alumni to draw from for financial support.

"Independent schools typically have to engage in a capital campaign to raise money for new facilities and typically the socio-economics of the student body

determine how much can be raised," said Judy Marks, director of the National Clearinghouse of Educational Facilities.

There are a few special cases where schools do not have to rely entirely on fundraising efforts. Jesuit priests bought Georgetown Prep's campus in 1916 and the value of prep's land skyrocketed in the late 20th century, with a Metro station opening directly across the street from the school's front entrance, and land values appreciating in the area in general.

Georgetown Prep approached Montgomery County about getting one corner of their campus near the Metro rezoned for high-density residential development. Once approved, Prep then signed a 99-year lease with a local builder that is expected to yield about \$800 million for the school over its lifetime.

Money earned from the lease covered about \$37.5 million of Georgetown Prep's \$70 million in recent capital projects, including the entire cost of the new athletic center.

"There is no way we could have built both buildings without the apartment project," said Gnat.

"I consider that the terrific legacy that the Jesuits left us when they bought our property. It adds terrific financial security to the school," said George.