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Athletes Hit the Books

Coaches, administrators in Fairfax County stress the importance of academics to athletes.

By Rich Sanders
The Connection

Student-athletes at the high school level might be sick of hearing it, but coaches and school administrators, for the most part around Northern Virginia, cannot stress enough the importance of attaining high academic achievement and disciplined study habits in the classroom.

"All of our coaches do a real good job of trying to develop the entire person," said Marty Riddle, the director of student activities (DSA) at Robinson High School. "If you're a disciplined kid who focuses on assignments in the classroom, that will carry over to the field or on the court."

Riddle, who in the years prior to his DSA duties at Robinson held head football coaching stints at Mount Vernon, Lake Braddock and Chantilly High Schools, said Robinson athletic coaches are responsible for being aware of their players' classroom progress.

"Each coach monitors the academic progress for the kids involved in their program," said Riddle. "High school coaches have to wear a lot of different hats and are in tune to those things."

In recent years, 40 percent of student-athletes in Fairfax County have achieved impressive grade point averages of 3.5 or better, according to the Fairfax County Public Schools system. In FCPS written guidelines, it states, "[Students'] grades are routinely monitored by the high school at midterm and at the end of each marking period. Parents may request an academic or athletic progress report at any time."

According to the Virginia High School



Madison runner Katy Reines.

League (VHSL), the state's governing body of high school sports, student-athletes, in order to remain eligible to compete in sports, must have passed at least five of their classes the previous semester. That is a minimal requirement. Schools can enforce more strict academic guidelines for student-athletes.

Academics certainly come first for members of the McLean High girls' field hockey team.

"Academics are very [much] stressed - at home and [at practices]," said Summer Vanni, McLean's second year head coach. "They know their school work comes first."

Vanni took over the Highlander pro-

gram last year and led it to the Liberty District finals and an appearance in the Northern Region playoffs.

Vanni's team is winning early on this year as well. The coach said players are required to achieve no worse than 'C' grades in all of their classes in order to remain on the team. She said her players are high achievers in school.

"To be honest, I never have a problem," said Vanni. "[Grades] are certainly stressed by our coaches and our parents are aware of it."

Katy Reines, a senior member of the Madison High girls' cross country team, said Warhawks' head coach Craig Chasse regularly encourages his athletes to work hard at their school work.

"It's always academics first and athletics second," said Reines, a fourth year member of the Madison cross country program. "Our coach is always stressing that we need to keep up our grades. [Being a student-athlete] teaches you how to manage your time real well."

AT HERNDON HIGH SCHOOL, football coach Joe Sheaffer does not start his football practices right after school. Instead, following the final bell, he allows for an hour-plus window of time at the end of the school day so that his players can tend to their studies. That allows for them to visit a particular teacher or to get started on homework.

"I set my practices back to make sure my kids get help whenever they need it," said Sheaffer, who a year ago led the Hornets to the Div. 6 region playoffs for the first time since 2003.

"They can get help academically every day if they need it," said Sheaffer. "I think the phrase 'student athlete' is something

we really back up. Most of our kids do a good job and they know they can get help if they need it."

Sheaffer, a physical education instructor at Herndon, credits members of his coaching staff with also helping their players on the study front when they can. One of his assistant coaches, former Redskins player Todd Liebenstein, teaches history at the school. Another, Larry Stroud, is an AP history instructor.

Sheaffer stresses to his players that in order to go to college or to perhaps continue their athletic careers in college requires solid study habits. Many colleges, according to Sheaffer, are setting higher standards for admission.

"You have to take harder classes [in high school] and do well on SATs. You have to be a good student or they won't want you. Most of our [football players] understand that."

Jim Patrick, McLean's second year head football coach and the assistant director of student activities at the school, said student-athletes on his team who are struggling with their grades attend a study hall following afternoon practice sessions, and players with poor grades must attend a mandatory Wednesday morning study hall session, affectionately known as "Highlander Time."

"Academics at McLean are very important," said Patrick, whose father, Bruce Patrick, is the Fairfax County Coordinator of Student Activities and Athletic Programs. "We monitor grades [four times a school year] at interim time. If they are bad, they go to study hall after practice."

"But we have motivated kids," said Patrick, of his players. "Parent involvement is there. ... You want them to perform at their highest level [at school], and it will carry into athletics. More colleges will be open to them."

JOHN ELLENBERGER, the South Lakes High football coach, said his top priority is to help prepare youngsters for college and beyond. And that means strong study skills are a necessity. Members of the South Lakes football program are required to fulfill summer reading projects.

"We are just continually on them about their academics," said Ellenberger. "My goal is to help the kids get into a [college] and out of Reston to see what it is like out there. So then [one day] they can come back to the community and contribute. That's what I'm here for - to help kids get into school."

Student-athletes do not automatically understand the importance of strong study habits in high school and the ramifications of not achieving academic success. Riddle said a love for an extra-curricular activity at school, such as sports, can help things begin to kick in for a student-athlete.



Photos by Craig Sterbutzel/The Connection

'Attitude and Effort,' the words written across football coach Joe Sheaffer's Herndon Hornets' t-shirt, are meant to apply to both the gridiron and the classroom.

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.

IN ADDITION TO a soccer field, sledding hill, basketball court, and flagstone patio, the new lower school's new state-of-the-art playground has an artificial turf pad where students can build structures out of oversized blocks and a wooden apparatus

called "the big toy," which is similar to a traditional jungle gym.

Potomac's youngest students can also play in a large sandbox that has a water feature and seating areas where they can build mud pies. Children can also climb a spinning, cone-like structure covered with loose netting.

There is a playhouse surrounded by a community garden and a few tricycles with a cement-riding path.

But by far, the most popular part of the playground during the first week of school is the "cloud nine" swings. The large saucers suspended in the air can fit four students in one at a time, said Donna Lewis, head of Potomac's lower school.

"The children will stand in line for more than half of their recess just to use these swings," said Lewis.

Eventually, Potomac's lower school playground will also include a climbing wall, though Lewis said the school will hold off on its installation since the students are still trying to cope with the all current options at recess.

"The goal is to try and inspire kids with different interests. The different areas will appeal to different children and there is a wide range of ability level between the ages of five and nine," said Lewis, whose division of the school enrolled 214 students this year.

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.

STILL, Potomac did see a jump in the number of families seeking information about their academic program once the new upper school was renovated, said spokesperson Jill Lucas.

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

"There are other schools that have nice, new facilities but, when it comes to athletics, I



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.

don't think anyone can top what we have," said Brian Gnat, a Georgetown Prep spokesperson.

This winter, Prep will also open a student center and new library facility that cost approximately \$30 million to build. The facility includes study areas, a café with a wood-burning oven that can cook five pizzas at one time, a projection television, and a recording studio for student musicians.

"I want Prep to be a weekend destination for day students. They could come work out or play some music, eat a meal and then watch the Redskins or Nationals on the television," said George, Georgetown Prep's president.

The school also spent about \$14 million installing artificial turf, redesigning their golf course and upgrading their road and parking system on campus, for a total of a \$70 million capital campaign overall.

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

The school installed its own turf field in 2007 and opened a new \$2.5 million strength and conditioning room at the beginning of last year. They are currently raising money to undergo a much more significant renovation of the first floor of their athletic facility that would include more meeting space for students and a new concession stand, said Erstling.

"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 last year.

"We actually did not have an arts center before. We split our time between our athletic center and what used to be field house for our school assemblies and performances," said Langley's spokesperson Sharon Ifft.

The new building has an auditorium that includes professional lighting and sound equipment as well as a stage that is slightly lower to the ground for Langley's younger students. There is also a band room designed to provide good acoustics for music.

"It really gives the students a more professional learning experience. They get to learn how to use the lighting equipment and do backstage work. I think it is very sophisticated, especially for school that only goes from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade," said Ifft.

ALL of these facilities are expensive and 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 to raise money for construction projects.

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 development, since it was near a major transit hub. 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. As a result, the school only had to raise money from donors to cover the costs of the student center.

"There is no way we could have built both buildings without the apartment project. That just brought in a tremendous source of revenue. We might have been able to do one or the other but not

both," 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.

FOR 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.

Private School Search Timeline

SEPTEMBER

- Finalize schools that you plan to inquire about.
- Request admissions and financial aid material by phone or online.
- Review admissions materials to determine which schools to visit.
- Keep a calendar of pertinent deadlines for admission and financial aid and procedures, such as when schools start taking reservations for individual tours and interviews.
- Register for standardized tests—the SSAT or ISEE (for middle school and high school).
- Review the test Web sites to learn procedures and see sample questions; consider whether you want to buy a test-preparation book.
- Call to schedule individual tours, interviews, class visits, and "shadow days." Ask elementary schools about their test schedules and how to make an appointment.

OCTOBER

- Visit open houses.
- Call to schedule tours, interviews, class visits, and school-based tests if you haven't already.
- Attend information sessions and take tours.
- Finalize school(s) to which you will make application.
- Take standardized test.

NOVEMBER

- Follow through on activities you may not have completed, such as scheduling tours, interviews, class visits, and standardized or school-based tests.
- Continue to watch for open houses you may want to attend.
- Start lining up teacher recommendations.
- Start working on applications, financial aid forms, student questionnaires, essays, etc.

DECEMBER

- Complete any remaining applications, questionnaires, etc.
 - Most application materials are due in January or early February.
- SOURCE: National Association of Independent Schools, www.nais.org/go/parents



Photo by Louise Krafft/Connection
Head of the Lower School, Donna Lewis.



Photo by Louise Krafft/Connection

A pair of saucer swings hold four children each in the new Potomac School playground.



Photo by Louise Krafft/Connection

Upper school students return from a field hockey practice.



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Fighting for Field Hockey

Despite a lack of youth programs,
field hockey continues to grow in Northern Virginia.

By Reed S. Albers
The Connection

Starr Karl watched girls from 11 area high schools compete at the Bulldog Invitational Field Hockey Tournament at Westfield High School last month; she wondered if the sport could ever move from niche to mainstream.

"You think about how kids get burned out on soccer and then wonder why not try something like field hockey?" the Southwestern Youth Association (SYA) and Rampage travel field hockey coach said. "It's growing. It will get more popular."

Field hockey is played interna-

tionally by men and women and is even an Olympic sport. It's slowly gaining a loyal following in Northern Virginia, despite a lack of youth programs to support the sport.

"There's a lot of girls who want to play, but we just don't have the programs to help them learn the sport," she said. "There's travel teams, but those can only serve so many girls."

The Bulldog Invitational is an example of how the sport has attracted a devoted following, even without feeder youth programs.

Although some of the high school players are experienced veterans or have played on travel teams, many just picked

up their sticks a few years ago.

"This is just my third year playing field hockey," Westfield High School junior Hannah Winfrey said. "I went to a summer camp at Westfield in my freshman year, but there weren't any youth programs to help me learn the game."

Most Fairfax County high schools have junior varsity and varsity field hockey programs, but some of the youth associations that feed the schools' talent don't offer the sport.

Schools that do offer youth field hockey see positive results from players growing up on the same team, such as St. Stephens

See **Sport Grows Slowly**, Page 7

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- Clean sink
- Clean appliance exteriors
- Clean inside microwave
- Clean range top
- Damp wipe cabinet doors
- Clean counters
- Hand wash floor
- Load dishwasher

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Sport Grows Slowly

From Page 6

and St. Agnes Private school.

The St. Stephens and St. Agnes varsity field hockey team went 22-0-1 in its 2008 season, and Head Coach Marsha Way credits the success to her player's familiarity with one another.

"The girls can start [playing field hockey] in seventh grade," Way said. "Our teams [are competitive] because our kids have been playing together for so long."

But for Fairfax County Public Schools, the chance to grow talent through a youth system is slim.

McLean Youth Association started its first youth field hockey program in the 1980s, but since then, the sport has seen only minor expansion, Karl said.

"South County Youth Association has a program, Loudoun County has a program and so does Vienna Youth Association, but it's just not enough," she said. "I started Southwestern Youth Association Field Hockey and we ran a program on Wednesday nights. Now it's a Monday program with games on Tuesday."

While the Monday night clinics are helping to serve the field hockey community, Karl said it's not nearly as big as she'd like.

"It's not a full league, just clinics to teach the game," she said. "We have a tournament at the end of October, but it's not as big as a league. We want to be there one day."

While the area does feature some programs, other large groups, such as Reston Youth Association and Braddock Road Youth Club, do not offer field hockey.

Keeping existing programs alive also remains a challenge. "Chantilly Youth Association had a program, but nobody has taken it over," Karl said. "There were about 150 kids in it and now it's defunct. The programs can't survive without leadership."

Interest from parents isn't the only hurdle. BRYC President Marcia Pape said she is reluctant to start a program without field space.

"It's not just getting coaches. The real question is where do you put them?" Pape said. "I'd love to have a field hockey program, but I can't do it without fields."

Area fields already are booked for football and soccer, she said. "Every few years people ask [about field hockey] but we just can't support it. There aren't enough fields."

Pape also said that a lack of volunteers is sidelining any future plans to add field hockey

to BRYC.

"I would not be comfortable adding another sport without the field space or support," she said. "We're an all-volunteer program and we would need someone to lead it. Nobody has offered to do that."

Karl's SYA program has had

similar issues, but has managed to function in spite of them.

SYA's program runs on Monday nights at E.C. Lawrence Field in September and October with occasional games on Tuesdays. The program serves boys and girls of all skill levels from third to eighth grade.

Coaches are former and current field hockey players, as well as high school coaches from the surrounding area.

"It's a great sport," she said. "If you're a great athlete, then you're going to enjoy playing field hockey. I wish it could be exposed to [more] youth."

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GERSHWIN: *Rhapsody in Blue*

RAVEL: Piano Concerto in G

GINASTERA: *Estancia*

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BARBER: Violin Concerto

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