

Athletic association dreams big while coaching little ones

It was just an empty field between the school and the church.

Today, it's the heart of the Our Lady of Hope/St. Luke Athletic Association, which in just three years has filled that field with flag football and soccer teams and built a concession stand.

The athletic association also fields basketball teams that practice in the cafeteria, with baskets affixed to the wall. Physical education teacher Roger Tennant joked that moving tables is his specialty.

The athletic association was a spin-off from the school's father's club. The club liked the idea of a sports program, but membership was dwindling, Mr. Tennant said.

"All of a sudden you realize you need coaches for all these teams and with a dwindling membership we weren't sure if we'd have enough people," Mr. Tennant said.

They started with flag football, because one dad had coached football before. The first year, 86 kids played; the next year 180 kids signed up.

The program quickly added indoor and outdoor soccer.

"Once it got organized, people really started to get on board," Mr. Tennant said. Parents started to volunteer. This past fall, the athletic association fielded two teams each in four age groups for outdoor soccer.

Because of league rules, the basketball team is restricted to students from Our Lady of Hope/St. Luke, but the flag football and soccer teams are open to the parish.

"There are no other programs like it in the area," Mr. Tennant said. "We wanted kids who don't normally play. We have kids of all skill levels out there. We have kids who have never done any sport, and they're given a chance to learn."

The more accomplished athletes, he said, “understand that they need to help the weaker players – it’s that whole team approach.”

Sacred Heart of Mary, which is just a few miles away, has joined them, using the soccer field and putting players on teams when they couldn’t field their own.

In a county where field space is at a premium, Our Lady of Hope/St. Luke is lucky; they can accommodate four flag footballs fields, or two full-size soccer fields and one clinic field.

Donna Auvil is the athletic association’s treasurer and her husband is the president. Ms. Auvil says parishioners have stopped her and told her it’s great to see the kids using the field.

“The feedback has been very, very positive,” she said.

“When you come by and see all of the young people who are involved in these teams, it’s just great,” said Sister Irene Pryle, S.S.N.D., principal of the school, which has 306 students from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade.

When Adam Moore, a family friend of pastor Father John B. Ward, died, his family asked that contributions be made to the school’s athletics program. Donations totaled \$3,500.

The program is self-supporting, and practices are held after school. Registration fees are as low as possible to keep it affordable for parents, and the concession stand is a steady source of revenue. But the athletic association dreams big. They’re selling Christmas trees, and the proceeds will go into a special projects fund. That could pay for improvements, such as fencing and lighting for the field.

But what they really hope for one day is a gym – even though they know the \$1.5 million price tag is a challenge, to say the least.

“Selling hotdogs in the concession stand is not going to get us there,” Ms. Auvil said. But they want to raise enough to do a feasibility study to make sure a gym is possible.

Sister Irene would love to see a gym.

“This athletic program has provided a wonderful opportunity for the children in this area,” she said, and adding that with a 22-acre campus, “we have the land.”

“I’m on board with a dream,” she says. “You have to set goals.”

It might not be such a long shot; after all, three years ago it was just an empty field.

Donations, made payable to Our Lady of Hope/St. Luke Athletic Association can be sent to the school at 8003 N. Boundary Road, Baltimore, MD 21222.