

Inside Sports: Cristo Rey lacrosse players stick together

With a roster heavily composed of inexperienced players, students on the Cristo Rey Jesuit lacrosse team rely on each other to develop their skills on the field and grow as players and young men. Watch a video of the players in action.

By Elizabeth Lowe

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Jahanne Bagwell worries about lacrosse balls shattering windows or the microwave when Cristo Rey Jesuit High School practices in its gymnasium,.

"It's hard," Bagwell, a freshman at Cristo Rey, said of practicing indoors.

He is one of 28 student athletes on the Fells Point school's lacrosse roster and among seven new to the sport.

Bagwell has played with friends in his neighborhood, but this is his first experience playing on a lacrosse team.

"It's a lot different," said Bagwell, 15. "It's real nice. You've got to focus on the stick."

Two days after a snowstorm, March 5 practice was in the gym, rather than Utz Field at Patterson Park. The focus remained on conditioning exercises and stick fundamentals. Players ran around the perimeter of the gym cradling balls in their sticks, with group pushups in order if anyone dropped the ball.

"If one of us dropped the ball, we all dropped the ball," said first-year head coach Julian Washington, who led the pushups.



Freshmen Jalen Widdowson and Kanaan Pittman square off during Lacrosse practice March 6 in Patterson Park.

(Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

This is the fifth season for lacrosse at Cristo Rey Jesuit, which opened in 2007, and the Hornets know they are playing catch-up.

While products of public schools are now more likely to appear on the college All-American teams, for generations lacrosse was dominated by prep schools, where the top players had been cradling sticks since they were toddlers.

The typical Cristo Rey Jesuit student has a high academic aptitude but comes from a city neighborhood where there are few guys playing lacrosse.

U.S. Lacrosse, the Baltimore-based nonprofit which serves as the national governing body for the sport, has gone to great lengths to promote the game beyond its traditional base, according to Eboni Preston, its associate director of diversity and inclusion.

"We're trying to change those barriers and break down those walls," Preston said. "Lacrosse is for everyone. We're trying to make it more accessible."

The values of the game go beyond wins and losses.

"Skills players develop on the field are transferrable to other aspects of life," she said. "It's not just about lacrosse. It's about keeping them (student athletes) off the street and learning the values of teamwork and respect. This is a great opportunity to learn about all the things that sports teach them."

Winfield Hopkins, a Cristo Rey senior who started playing lacrosse as a sixth-grader at St. Ignatius Loyola Academy, likes the teamwork aspect of the sport.

"It's a tough sport to play," said Hopkins, 18. "I try to be the best model I can be. A lot of people are nervous to play. We've got to give them the confidence."

Last season, Hopkins was named to the Maryland Interscholastic Athletic Association C Conference all-star team.

Freshman Dylan Lehew is a more typical Cristo Rey player. He had never heard of lacrosse before coming to the school, and credits his teammates with making him better.

"I see it as they're helping me out while I'm still learning," said Lehew, 15. "We help each other."

All players, regardless of their level of experience, have the opportunity to lead, improve and have fun, said Vinny Marchionni, assistant coach, defensive coordinator and a Cristo Rey social studies teacher.

"I'm looking for growth and obstacles are just a part of growth," said Marchionni, a Jesuit scholastic. "We're all in this together."

The Hornets' first game is March 18 against Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School in Pikesville.



This is the fifth season for Cristo Rey Jesuit High School lacrosse. Of 28 on the roster, seven are new to the sport, which is coached by the school's new head coach, Julian Washington. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

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