

INSIDE SPORTS: Spalding's broad-based program decades in the making

By Paul McMullen

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Editor's note: The Catholic Review will use a multimedia approach to cover high school athletics during the 2013-14 school year. This is the first in a series.

SEVERN - Nicki Trumpler teaches religion and coaches softball at Archbishop Spalding High School. A 1995 graduate of the school, she remembers playing under trying circumstances.

"Softball consistently won championships," Trumpler said, "but we had no practice facility, had to pile into cars and drive to Randazzo Park for our home games. We practiced next to the cornfield where the stadium is now."

Trumpler now coaches from a dugout in a showcase facility, completed in 2011, steps from the main entrance to Spalding.

It is just south of the aforementioned four-year-old stadium, newly-renamed (Mike) Whittles Field, which includes an artificial turf field, seating for 2,000, a scoreboard with video screen and 400-meter track. Fairly new to track and field, Spalding now hosts the Maryland Interscholastic Athletic Association (boys) and Interscholastic Athletic Association of Maryland (girls) championships.

Across the road is a still fairly-new gymnasium, which opened in 2006.

All three facilities are concrete examples of the growth Spalding has engineered, attributable somewhat to geography, but primarily to the ambition and commitment of administration, coaches and community behind a student body of 1,198.

"We had 700 students when I was a student," said Jeff Parsons, the athletic director who was in that same Spalding Class of 1995 with Trumpler. "Now we have 750 participating in athletics. What's unique, as we've gotten bigger, we've kept the small-school feel."

Humble roots

In 1966, Martin Spalding High School, named for the seventh Archbishop of Baltimore, opened off New Cut Road, in farmland a few miles south of what was then called Friendship International Airport.

It began as an all-girls school. The first male students entered in 1973, and Spalding painstakingly added programs. In the 1980s, a fledgling football team lost 39 straight games. Other teams maintained a low profile.

"I went away to college and when I came back in 2001 to teach I could see a shift," said Trumpler, who went to Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg. "Spalding had gone from fighting to find itself to teams winning. Now pretty much all of our teams are competing for rankings, championships and recognition with the public schools that we didn't see in 1995."

What happened?

Interstate 97, which opened in 1993, and the ensuing completion of Maryland Route 100 made it easier to get to Spalding. That growth brought overcrowding to some Anne Arundel County public schools, and Spalding was an affordable option.

Lee Dove, now the executive director of the MIAA, became athletic director in 1995, and found like-minded administrators in the president's office, such as Dr. Michael Murphy and Kathleen Mahar. Before she became president in 2011, Mahar was the principal of Spalding, and she credits coaches for building what were basically start-up programs.

"I'd like to say the administration can take credit for wrestling, but that's on Mike Laidley's shoulders," Mahar said. "Look at what Mike Whittles did, they know how to develop relationships."

Laidley was a Spalding wrestling parent when that program was on the verge of folding. Two years ago, it went unbeaten in the A Conference and won the MIAA championship. Whittles died in June 2012 of prostate cancer, less than a year after taking what had been a doormat football program to the A Conference playoffs.

That foundation led Kyle Schmitt, who played for the University of Maryland in the 2002 Orange Bowl, trade the security of a position in Howard County for the challenge and freedom of coaching in the A Conference, where teams from the Gilman School to St. Frances Academy have already played their season openers on ESPN.

Spalding's athletic rise has not come without controversy. In September 2002, the boys' basketball team, still new to the Baltimore Catholic League, was scorned over the addition of Rudy Gay.

Critics point to transient young athletes being used by the system, but Gay used Spalding to his benefit. Unlike many of his peers, he met the NCAA requirements for academic eligibility at the University of Connecticut in the fall of 2004.

Gay plays for the Toronto Raptors in the NBA, where his annual salary is \$15.1 million. He can afford a personal trainer, but on Aug. 15, Gay was pumping iron in the Spalding weight room.

"Nobody saw the two hours a day Rudy spent with tutors here," Mahar said.

“Everyone knows Emily Weiman is setting pitching records for N.C. State, but more importantly, she kills it in the classroom.”

30 sports, 1 team

The breadth of Spalding’s athletic program is what makes it distinctive. In the last decade, girls soccer, basketball and softball have been ranked No. 1 by the Baltimore Sun. So have boys basketball and wrestling; baseball won an A Conference championship in 2011.

While some schools have two or three high-profile programs, it has been a springboard for many others beyond Gay and Weiman, who, pitched all but four softball games for N.C. State and repeated on the Atlantic Coast Conference All-Academic team.

- A lacrosse standout in the B Conference, Kyle Dixon, a 2002 graduate, was an All-American at the University of Virginia and still plays midfield for the Major League Lacrosse champion Chesapeake Bayhawks.
- Christine Nairn, a 2009 graduate, went to Penn State and was the runnerup last soccer season in balloting for the Herrmann Trophy, given to the nation’s top college soccer player.
- Charlie Lynch, a 2011 graduate, used his wrestling prowess to gain admission to the University of Pennsylvania, a member of the Ivy League.
- University of Oklahoma golfer Kaitlyn Rohrbach, Class of 2010, is the only girl ever to win the MIAA championship.

Spalding now has enough female golfers to merit the addition of a girls’ team. That will give the Cavaliers 30 teams.

“Last year,” Parsons said, “our motto was ‘29 Sports, 1 Team.’ We borrowed it from an old University of Maryland campaign. I want every coach to think their sport is the most important, but to also realize there are 29 others. We talk early on, we’re in this together.”

Famous alumni can help spread a school’s brand, but also plant unrealistic expectations among parents. As competition for playing time and college scholarships increases, how does a Catholic high school pursue athletic excellence without compromising its ideals?

“Any school, but especially a Catholic school, must maintain a student- and mission-focused environment,” Mahar said. “Those priorities cannot be hijacked.”

Spalding’s stadium, part of a capital campaign that also produced a new art and technology wing, cost \$1.8 million. The gymnasium project, which included a fitness center and eight state-of-the art religion classrooms, cost \$5.8 million.

Next up is a renovation of the auditorium, where rising opera baritone Zachary Nelson – who also played football for the Cavaliers – used to perform.

Senior Maggie Kaulius is among the students who have benefitted from all that development. A field hockey player who has accepted a scholarship to play lacrosse at Penn State, she is a legacy, as both of her parents played for Spalding in less heady days.

"The art wing in school, the turf field," Kaulius said. "They are in awe every time they come on campus."

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