

Mount St. Joseph rugby worth a try

Only in its second year, the Mount St. Joseph High School, Irvington, Rugby Football Club, has already surpassed initial expectations in terms of participation and success.

More than 130 students attended an information session on the sport during orientation last fall and head coach Mike Finley was quite frank and upfront, saying, "If you don't want to get hit or hit someone, do something else."

The club team got underway through the initiative of Eric Schroeder, a 2006 Gael grad who now attends Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, and senior Sean Dalton. With the backing and support from the school's administration, the MOJO Rugby Football Club was formed and went 5-4-2 in its inaugural year. The team competes in both the Maryland Interscholastic Athletic Association league and the Potomac Rugby Union.

With a no-cut policy, the program is growing by leaps and bounds, now fielding three teams this season with 77 players on the books.

Finley, a 1979 U.S. Naval Academy graduate and an 18-year veteran of the sport, is assisted by Mount St. Joseph teachers Ryan Folmer, Marc Hoffman and Rich Sargo. "The players wanted more overall structure," Finley said regarding 2007 season goals and expectations. "They talked about wanting more structure in practices and wanting to win the MIAA."

Ron Manning, who plays the second-row and is one of the team's leading scorers, is the team captain. Senior wing Chris Robinson, in his first year with the rugby program, has four years of high school soccer under his belt, and has been a top-notch competitor and contributor this season on the rugby pitch. Also seeing significant action is junior wing Chris Lowe.

Taking a major role in the scrum thus far are seniors Travis Councell and Mike Reeta, both hard-hitting players who can effectively get the ball out to their wings.

Senior Tom Dow plays between both the A and the B teams and, according to Finley, has been an excellent example of a hard worker.

“I like rugby because it is egalitarian,” said Finley. “There is a place for everyone to play. It’s a very collegial and hospitable sport.”

The team wears a T-shirt with the Shakespearian quote from “Henry V,” “For he who sheds his blood with me today shall be my brother.”

According to Finley, the forming of the MIAA rugby league was the first of its kind in the country. Now that other jurisdictions across the country have followed suit, high school teams and clubs have grown from 250 teams in 1990 to more than 1,000 in 2007.

The qualifying tournament round in the MIAA league gets underway May 1.