

COLUMNS COMMENTARY

Why does the Courier cover sports?

By Karen M. Franz
Editor in chief

As you know, Bishop Matthew H. Clark has used his Along the Way column on three occasions during the last few months to engage in a dialogue about the *Catholic Courier*. One installment in that ongoing dialogue appears on page 2 of this edition.

In addition, staff members and I have made a number of parish visits during the past six months to meet with parishioners throughout the diocese. Those visits have enabled us to gather additional feedback from readers of the *Courier*.

The establishment of this column — which will appear in the last issue of each month — will be part of the *Courier's* ongoing efforts to respond to reader commentary about our work. In successive columns, I will address a variety of reader questions about *Courier* coverage and, periodically, discuss issues that pertain to the media in general. Sometimes the column will center on a single question; other times, I'll briefly address several topics.

This month I'd like to take up the question that has arisen most frequently in comments made to Bishop Clark and to me: the *Courier's* coverage of sports, and the amount of space that is allocated to such coverage each week.

My intention here is not to "justify" the *Courier* staff's dedication to sports coverage, but instead to explain the rationale behind it in the hope of fostering further reflection among readers and further dialogue.

The broadest criticism offered of our sports coverage is that sports is not a necessary component of a Catholic newspaper and that the space it occupies could be used better for coverage of diocesan news, world affairs, spiritual issues and the like.



BETWEEN THE LINES

In response to such comments I should state up front that I have no personal interest in sports whatsoever. So I'm predisposed to agree with the notion that sports isn't essential to the *Catholic Courier*. But developing youth readership is. Don't tell this to any teenagers, but sports was added to the *Catholic Courier* nearly nine years ago for the express purpose of tricking kids into reading the paper. And all the available evidence suggests that the trick works.

According to teachers who have used the *Courier* in Newspaper in Education programs, kids from grades five to 12 immediately turn to the sports pages when they're handed a copy of the paper. Does that fact alone constitute success? No, we hope that while flipping to the sports pages they might pause to read something about the diocesan Synod, a papal statement on world affairs or a feature on parish social-ministry activity.

But even if they don't read anything but sports, we've made a start. First of all, we've lured them away from TV long enough to read something other than a textbook — which is no minor

feat these days. And we've fostered a habit of looking to the diocesan newspaper for news that interests them — a habit we hope they'll expand on as adults.

Given that the youths of today are the future of the church, I think it's missing the point to say the *Courier* doesn't need sports.

But, some critics say, kids don't need to read the *Courier* to get coverage of high school sports; it's already in the secular press.

That's not entirely true. In Rochester, high-school athletics compete against professional and collegiate sports for coverage in the *Democrat and Chronicle* and *Times-Union*. That leaves precious little space for an individual high school or outstanding athlete.

The suburban weeklies in Monroe County provide coverage of the high schools located in the suburbs. But schools in the city don't fare so well. Only outside Monroe County — where sports writer Mike Latona notes the daily and weekly secular papers do a "tremendous" job of covering high-school teams — does the criticism of redundancy really apply. The flip side of that statement is that only two Catholic high schools exist outside Monroe County.

Ah, but that brings us to another criticism of *Courier* sports coverage: Since far more Catholic teens attend public school than attend Catholic school, why do we give so much space to so few kids?

Obviously the *Courier* could not even begin to cover all of the high schools — both public and Catholic — within the 12-county diocese. So we have to limit ourselves to the seven Catholic schools and those public schools with which they compete.

But that doesn't mean that the *Courier* disregards the achievements of Catholic teens who are involved in

athletics at public high schools. Unfortunately, we won't know that public-school athletes are active Catholics unless we discover that fact ourselves or someone — a parent, pastor or youth coordinator — tells us so.

Armed with that knowledge, we could highlight these public-school athletes' contributions to their teams' games against Catholic high schools. In addition, such players would make great subjects for sports-feature stories during the off-season (June through August). So, if you know of such a young person, please give Mike Latona a call.

I could discuss several other reasons (positive coverage of youths, promotion for Catholic schools, etc.) for covering sports, but I think the foregoing hits the main points.

Does that mean the *Courier's* position on this issue is fixed and unchangeable? Certainly not. I hope many of you who have strong feelings either for or against our sports coverage will take the time to respond to my remarks. I'll be very pleased to report your comments and respond to them in future columns. Only through ongoing discussion can we at the *Courier* continue to make our product more appropriate to your needs.

THE LAST PORTION of this column will offer a brief preview of the major articles planned for the following month's issues. Coming up next month are:

- An April 7 page-one story on economic empowerment.
- An April 14 page-one story on ministry to young-adult Catholics.
- And our annual Vocations Supplement (April 21).

Send your comments to: *Between the Lines*, *Catholic Courier*, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624.

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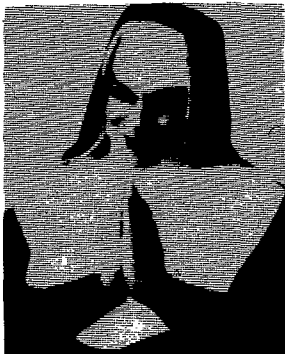
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