

ON THE MOVE

Story by
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Photo by
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Keeping Good



in the game

Coach Chris Belmont and the Nazareth Academy girls' varsity basketball team say a prayer before the quarterfinal game against Penn Yan Feb. 22 at Franklin High School in Rochester.

Whether in public or private, prayer is an absolute must for the Aquinas Institute indoor track program. Two days before the recent Section 5 championship meet, the boys' and girls' teams both upheld an annual tradition by participating in a candlelight service in the Aquinas school chapel.

"I believe in guardian angels, and I always believe our success begins with that service," said Ray Manuszak, the program's head coach.

Manuszak's boys and girls have enjoyed quite a bit of success, winning six sectional crowns altogether. The latest title was earned by the Little Irish boys' squad on Feb. 23, when it finished first among 12 teams in the Class B division.

This triumph prompted a prayer in plain view of all spectators and other athletes. Following a victory lap around the University of Rochester track, all 21 Aquinas boys dropped to their knees and recited a Hail Mary. The gesture brought tears to Manuszak's eyes.

"It made me feel very proud because it was automatic. The kids knew the championship

wasn't complete until they thanked God," he said.

Team member C.J. Gremke, a senior, said the prayer was spontaneous and felt totally natural.

"I guess it's become such an integral part of our team, it just came to us," said Gremke, 18, a parishioner at St. Lawrence in Greece, who explained that the Little Irish conclude each practice with a prayer.

Such acts might help erase negative stereotypes that are sometimes applied to athletes. "Part of the problem with jocks is everybody thinks they're out for themselves. We don't buy that image," Gremke said.

"The team effort, the way our faith comes through — we're going to do things the way they should be done."

Stephanie Herbst, who plays for the highly successful Nazareth Academy girls' varsity basketball team that earned the Section 5 Class B championship on March 4, said that faith and teamwork go hand-in-hand with the Lasers. Each contest is preceded by a group prayer in the locker room, she said.

"We work hard as a team, and we bring that prayer into the game with us," said Herbst, 17, a senior who serves as the Lasers' starting point guard. "I don't know about the other girls, but I pray that we play together as a team and that nobody gets hurt."

Herbst said she doesn't actually pray for a victory, but "that everybody play the best game they can."

Stephanie Blackburn, 17, a senior at Our Lady of Mercy, said that her swimming, basketball and lacrosse squads all join in prayer before their meets and games. In addition, she wears an angel pin and crucifix on

game days. She removes them before the competition begins because athletes aren't allowed to wear jewelry during contests due to safety concerns. These symbols, she said, "remind me to keep a religious and faith-filled atmosphere."

Blackburn acknowledged that prayer helps her maintain integrity in competitive situations when action gets fierce and tempers grow short.

"It's kind of hard to do that — but what the game means compared to life, it's very minimal. I guess I don't take (rough play) as personally as some people might," said Blackburn, a parishioner at St. Rita's in Webster.

Herbst, whose Nazareth Academy team earned a Section 5 Board of Officials sportsmanship award last year, remarked, "Prayer always sticks with you. Everybody works and plays hard, but we also show our respect to the other team."

"Sportsmanship is one of the best ways to show your faith. We're all called to be Christ to each other," Gremke said.

Displaying sportsmanship on the court also helps sets an example for people in the stands, Herbst added. "We have a lot of people coming to our games. I think everybody on our team is a role model to somebody," she said.

Blackburn agreed that the values recalled in team prayer should be observed by everyone connected with an athletic event — players, fans, coaches.

"I do know that people get riled up, maybe the ref made a bad call," she said. "(But) all people involved in sports should be displaying the Christian attitude."

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McQuaid coach honored

Mike Fennell, head coach of McQuaid Jesuit High School's varsity baseball team, has been chosen as recipient of the Inspiration Award by the James P. Wilmot Cancer Center in Rochester. He will be honored Saturday, April 27, during the center's Discovery Ball fundraiser at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center.

The Inspiration Award spotlights people who give cancer survivors hope for the future. Fennell has battled lung cancer for more than a year, yet he still led his McQuaid squad to its first-ever Section 5 championship last spring.

For ticket and sponsorship information on the Discovery Ball, call 585/275-0006.