

Birk's new initiative encourages purpose in Catholic school athletics

Matthew Davis | April 17, 2018

Could the intensity of traveling teams be taking the “sport” out of “sports,” especially for young athletes?

Former Minnesota Viking Matt Birk thinks so.

Speaking to nearly 140 Catholic elementary school coaches, athletic directors and staff, Birk said there's another approach to facing growing demands of youth athletics where parents can “relax” and “let your kids be kids,” instead buying into the year-round commitments to traveling teams and clubs.

That approach, he said, can be found in a new program, 4 His Glory, an initiative of the Minneapolis-based nonprofit Catholic Schools Center of Excellence, designed to help K-8 Catholic schools better fulfill their mission in the area of youth athletics with a faith-filled, positive culture.

“There is just not enough of those opportunities out there anymore,” Birk, an alumnus of Cretin-Derham Hall in St. Paul, said of playing sports for fun and learning. “I think everybody recognizes the problem.”

Birk worked with CSCOE to develop 4 His Glory, a sports program that aims to reclaim K-8 youth sports for the family, providing “an alternative for Catholic elementary schools to the secular sports-obsessed culture,” according to CSCOE.

Abbreviated “4HG,” the initiative is expected to roll out in Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis in August.

Speaking April 13 at a six-hour CSCOE event introducing the project to Catholic schools, Birk stressed the values that sports can teach participants, but he also emphasized that they need to be kept in perspective for a student-player's well-being.

In his opening presentation, he said sports can help children face societal challenges such as increased narcissism, fatherless homes and child obesity. He also noted that MIT researchers have found that

teamwork and communication skills remain top skills sought by employers.

Catholic school staff also heard from a panel of former professional athletes and a college coach, all Catholic, about the challenges of modern athletics and what Catholic schools can offer. Panelists included 1996 Hobey Baker award winner

Glory “came from the schools themselves, who told us that they really noticed a big change in youth athletics.”

“They felt that it was eating into family time, particularly on Sundays, but also dominating family time on evenings and weekends,” she said.



Matt Birk, moderates a panel discussion about youth sports during an event at St. Charles Borromeo April 13 promoting his new youth sports program called For His Glory. Panelists are, from left, John Tauer, men's basketball coach at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, former Vikings quarterback Brooks Bollinger, former Vikings quarterback Rich Gannon and former NHL player Brian Bonin. Dave Hrbacek/The Catholic Spirit

and former NHL player Brian Bonin, 2002 NFL MVP and former Vikings quarterback Rich Gannon, 2000 Rose Bowl champion and one-time Vikings quarterback Brooks Bollinger, and 2016 NCAA Division III national champion men's basketball coach John Tauer of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul.

Birk, who led the discussion, played for the Vikings and then the Baltimore Ravens from 1998-2012, winning a Super Bowl in his final Ravens season.

CSCOE's mission is to enhance excellence and increase enrollment at grade schools in the archdiocese. Its president, Gail Dorn, said the idea of 4 His

Traveling and club teams often win out for Catholic school students' time as sports participation has dropped at Catholic schools, participants observed. The quality of competition, latest equipment and vision for future success with traveling programs has made it hard for Catholic schools to keep up.

Holy Trinity Catholic School in South St. Paul, which had conference attendees, needed fifth- and sixth-grade students to fill a roster for its seventh-grade boys basketball team last winter. However, Aric Elsner, who coaches seventh-grade boys, recalled that the nature of the school program made it possible for a student who had never made a basket to finally

make one during the game at the end of the season. Fans erupted in applause.

Participants shared concerns about competing with traveling teams. Gerald Rehder, a physical education teacher from St. Stephen Catholic School in Anoka, noted that student athletes at his school have complained that the school's sports equipment is lower quality than that of their traveling teams.

For Holy Family Academy in St. Louis Park, participation numbers in sports have varied widely based on class interest.

"It was encouraging to...come together as a group to support Catholic schools for the right reason and to really recapture what sports are about and what they teach,"

said Lisa Counts, Holy Family Academy athletics director.

4 His Glory includes training materials, promotional materials and sports clinics to enhance Catholic identity, participation and success for Catholic school teams.

The program targets both youths and coaches. Teams can pray an athlete prayer focused on glorifying God before competition and practice. Coaches have access to an app with a practice builder program with videos of drills from highly successful coaches such as Duke University men's basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski.

Schools can also use posters, bracelets and apparel to promote the initiative. Posters include images of athletes such

as Birk and Minnesota Twins star Joe Mauer, also a Cretin-Derham Hall alumnus, in addition to faith-related quotes.

Much of the April 13 conference explored what Catholic schools can offer that traveling programs typically can't. It came down to faith, character building and community.

"I think the biggest thing to take away from the day is that we as Catholic schools need to have ... a clear statement about what our Catholic school programs provide that is unique and special to Catholic schools," said Sheila Hendricks, principal of Faithful Shepherd Catholic School in Eagan. "This is a great opportunity to help our children through sports."