

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

A WARM WELCOME

ST. JEROME IN
MAPLEWOOD
EMBRACES KAREN
COMMUNITY,
CLASSICAL
CURRICULUM

4HG

4 HIS GLORY YOUTH
ATHLETICS LED BY
FORMER PRO FOOTBALL
PLAYER MATT BIRK HELPS
KEEP GOD IN THE HUDDLE
OF YOUTH SPORTS

FALL 2018



SPORTS COLUMN

Keeping God in the huddle of youth sports

Former football pro Matt Birk spearheads 4HG athletics at Catholic grade schools to keep positivity on playing fields

By Jessica Weinberger

Growing up in St. Paul, Minnesota, former Minnesota Viking and Super Bowl champion Matt Birk played sports wherever he could — at the playground, the rec center or later, at Nativity of Our Lord Catholic School and Cretin-Derham Hall High School. With minimal structure and endless free play, he reaped the physical, social and emotional benefits of sports where every kid, regardless of ability, had a chance to play.

But the sports culture has evolved in the decades since then, with drastic increases in cost, time commitment and pressure. As an alternative to the secular, win-at-all-costs sports culture, Birk has partnered with the Catholic Schools Center of Excellence (CSCOE) to spearhead the 4HG (4 His Glory) program. The program's mission is to develop well-rounded children by creating a healthy sports culture in Catholic schools.

As a father of eight, Birk said he's seen it all in youth sports, from over-competitive parents to burnt-out kids to heated arguments with referees. With 4HG, he wants to shift the focus to effort, teamwork and, most importantly, fun.

"Everything we do should be to glorify God," Birk explained. "We should be glorifying God and thanking him for this opportunity to have the talent and physical ability to play sports and be with our friends and use it as a tool that develops kids physically, emotionally, socially and, ultimately, spiritually."

To get the kindergarten through eighth grade program off the ground, Birk has teamed up with athletes and coaches like Joe Mauer, Lauren Lawler, Brian Bonin, Brooks Bollinger, Dr. John Tauer and more. Many are featured in inspirational 4HG posters for school gyms and in short videos about the program.

All participants will sign a code of conduct, and athletes will also receive wristbands and shoe laces to serve as visual reminders of doing their best, regardless of the outcome. Clinics to experiment with different sports will start this fall and winter with a focus on the most popular sports in the Archdiocesan schools: soccer and basketball.

An athlete prayer for practices and games will remind participants of 4HG's vision for the true purpose of athletics, which is using their God-given talents to participate with gratitude, grit, bravery, teamwork and humility.

As a parent and youth sports coach, Jim Weiland admits that it is easy to become too focused on winning. It wasn't until his son, now an eighth grader at Shakopee Area Catholic School, reminded him that he just wanted to have fun and play with his friends that Weiland took another look at how they were approaching sports.

Weiland said that many parents are looking for permission to schedule less

activities for their kids and have them play for Catholic schools. With 4HG, these student-athletes will have a healthier experience with sports that aligns with the mission of Catholic schools overall.

"Sports are just one piece of developing the whole child. It's not 'the' thing like our culture says it is, but it's a tool by which they can learn some great life lessons, so they can be the leaders that they are created to be," said Weiland, the parish business administrator at Annunciation Catholic Church in Minneapolis.

Jeanne Garry, a physical education teacher at Epiphany Catholic School in Coon Rapids, first heard about 4HG last spring at an introductory event. The message of taking back sports immediately resonated with her. As a coach and teacher, she has seen children pushed to the point of burnout while also leading to a greater risk for injuries.

"For the last years, I felt like youth sports was going in the wrong direction," Garry said. "More specialization is not healthy for kids and leads to more injuries, versus diversifying and not using the same muscle groups."

After attending the CSCOE conference, Mike Sullwold, the athletic director and physical education teacher at Saint Rose of Lima Catholic School in Roseville, felt hopeful that 4HG could give students the unique chance to play for several years with the same friends and classmates while not dealing with team cuts. There is also the potential for mentoring that isn't always a priority in competitive traveling leagues.

"We're going to put more emphasis on our older kids taking a younger kid underneath their arm and saying, 'This is how we do things, and this is how you get better,'" Sullwold said.

As Birk rolls out the 4HG program across the Archdiocese, he said that knowing how this program could change the experience of young student-athletes and develop positive role models is more exciting than even winning Super Bowl XLVII with the Baltimore Ravens in 2013. And it all starts with Catholic schools.

"Catholic schools is where this can work," Birk said about changing the sports culture with 4HG. "I'm excited because I think this is going to be yet another way Catholic schools can set themselves apart, as well as help each child become their best self. I encourage parents, coaches and students to learn more about 4HG, embrace it's mission and spread the word. Working together we can turn the tide and in the process, build our children's faith." †

Learn more about 4HG at 4hg.co.

MATT BIRK PLAYING FOR
THE MINNESOTA VIKINGS.



4
H G
FOR HIS GLORY®