

## Former Viking Matt Birk is co-founding a Catholic high school in Burnsville

By Nick Ferraro

When Matt Birk announced his retirement from football six years ago, the Baltimore Ravens center and former Minnesota Viking did not hold a news conference at the team facility. He chose a library at a Baltimore elementary school as the place to say he was leaving the game he first played as a kid growing up in St. Paul.

"I've enjoyed playing football. But as much as playing football, I've enjoyed doing this," the 14-year NFL veteran said, referring to his community service with children through his HIKE Foundation.

Birk took questions from a class of students who sat legs crossed and looked up at the big man who helped bring the city a Super Bowl win a few weeks earlier. A boy in the back asked Birk why he's retiring.

"Well, I'm old," Birk said, drawing high-pitched laughs. "I have six kids, and it's just time. I just feel like it's time to do something else."

Birk, now 42 with two more kids and living in Mendota Heights, believes he has found that something else. For the past year, Birk has been working with Tom Bengtson, a local entrepreneur and businessman, to start up what would be the metro area's first Catholic high school south of Interstate 494.

Named Unity High School, it is set to open this fall in space at Mary, Mother of the Church in Burnsville, offering ninth grade only. The plan is to then add a grade each year until those freshmen are in 12th grade.

"We're going to start small, maybe 25 students or so the first year," Birk said last week. "We're not only looking at this as just year one ... we're thinking 20 years down the road. What is this going to look like? We think it will be a

thriving high school and thriving community."

Birk is a devout Catholic who attended private schools his whole life — Nativity of Our Lord School, then Cretin-Derham Hall High School. He said he realizes that more and more children continue to be priced out of Catholic education, especially when they hit high school. Unity's tuition for the 2019-20 school year will be \$6,500.

"We'll go up a little bit from there, but not much," said Birk, a Harvard graduate with a degree in economics. "I don't want this to come off like I'm throwing any stones at anybody, but it doesn't have to cost \$15,000 or \$20,000 a year. And I was a financial-aid kid and would not have been able to go to high school without financial aid. But even with that, it was a big struggle."

"But I think we have a sound financial model and also a good product."

### RECEPTION HAS BEEN GOOD

The idea has been in Birk's head since retirement. After moving back to the Twin Cities two years ago, he heard from a friend that Bengtson was looking to do the same in the south metro.

Bengtson, who is the owner and president of a small publishing company, co-founded Chesterton Academy in St. Louis Park in 2008, and

served as a chairman for seven years. The Catholic school started with 10 students and now has an enrollment of about 165 at campuses in Edina and off Stillwater Boulevard on St. Paul's East Side.

"I wanted to do this, but I didn't know what it takes," Birk said. "I'm not a detail person, and Tom is. He knows exactly what to put in the budget, things like a crucifix for the rooms and desks and how you hire. Just being through it before, he knows and has the template of how to do this year one."



Baltimore Ravens center Matt Birk, bottom, plays with his children on the Mercedes-Benz Superdome field after an NFL Super Bowl XLVII walkthrough on Saturday, Feb. 2, 2013, in New Orleans. The Ravens faced the San Francisco 49ers in Super Bowl XLVII. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

The two met up a year ago and "we realized our visions were pretty similar," Bengtson said last week.

Bengtson had already spent a year doing research and hosting weekly meetings with community leaders in

Lakeville to gauge interest. The reception was good. So are the prospects.

"There are 10 Catholic grade schools in that south-metro geography area that have eighth grade," Bengtson said. "So that means there about 300 eighth-graders graduating every year from Catholic grade school in kind of that south-metro geography. Most of them end up going to public school because there's really no close options, and also there's an affordability issue there, too."



**Tom Bengtson**

Bengtson, 58, grew up in South Minneapolis and went to Academy of Holy Angels in Richfield. He said it always amazed him that some of his classmates would drive from Apple Valley, Burnsville, even Lakeville, to get to Holy Angels. Those cities have since exploded in population, not to mention Eagan and Rosemount.

"There's still a clear need," he said, adding he doesn't consider St. Thomas Academy and Visitation School in Mendota Heights to be south metro because they are north of Interstate 494. "If you go into the south metro, you don't hit another Catholic high school until you get to Faribault. So if you live in Lakeville, there are no options."

Bengtson said his research shows there about 70,000 Catholic high school-aged kids in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, and that only 7,300 of them attend the 14 Catholic high schools each year. Bengtson said that tells him there is lots of room for Unity High School without hurting the enrollment of current ones.

"And we're not setting up right next to any schools," he said. "The closest schools to us are going to be St. Thomas and Visitation and Holy Angels — and those are nine miles away. And you have to cross the river to get to them."

### **EMPHASIS ON LEADERSHIP, CHARACTER**

The school will combine a standard liberal-arts-plus-science-and-math curriculum with an "emphasis on leadership education designed to develop character, virtue and a desire to serve," according to its website.

Wednesdays will be reserved for "Real World Wednesdays," offering up leadership training, hands-on learning and a service component that will be part of the students' graduation requirements. Students will go to Mass three days a week.

"But what we really want to do, what we think we're doing is giving kids a foundation, putting them on a trajectory to thrive in life, regardless of their path," Birk said. "And that starts with giving them a firm foundation in their faith."

The school has begun the three-phase process with the archdiocese to gain official status as a Catholic high

school in the archdiocese, Bengtson said.

Former Baltimore Ravens center Matt Birk holds a child after the Ravens' Super Bowl XLVII victory in 2013. Now living in Mendota Heights, he is working to start up what would be the metro area's first Catholic high school south of Interstate 494. (AP Photo/Gene Puskar)

There are obvious challenges to starting out, he said. Students and teachers will have to bring their own lunch. There is not a gym, but the church has land with a soccer field next to the school that can be used for physical education.

And with Birk being a former NFL player, people want to know about athletics. That will depend on the interest of students and willingness of the parents to volunteer to coach, Bengtson said.

"I tell people that sports are one of the important, unimportant things," Birk said. "We'll have sports, but I think you need to keep sports in perspective. Here's what I'd like to say: If you think you're a Division I athlete, and if that's your focus, don't come to Unity. But if you want to be Division I in your faith and your character and leadership, then come to Unity."

Bengtson said 40 families with eighth-graders have said they would consider going to the school in the fall. Just two families have paid the down payment to secure a spot, but Bengtson said he is not worried about the low number "because families tend to wait until August to decide."

Birk said his second-oldest child will be in the inaugural class and that the rest of his kids will follow.

"A lot of people like what we're doing and like the fact we're taking a swing at this," he said. "But there's an element of courage for a family to decide, 'Hey, I'm going to send my kid to this new high school. Is it real? Is it happening? Is it going to be sustainable?' I tell people, 'OK, I'm sending my kids to this school, so this is happening.' And hopefully, that gives some people some confidence that Unity is going to be around for a long time."



Former Baltimore Ravens center Matt Birk holds one of his children after the Ravens' Super Bowl XLVII victory in 2013. Now living in Mendota Heights, he is working to start up what would be the metro area's first Catholic high school south of Interstate 494. (AP Photo/Gene Puskar)