

StarTribune



NFL veteran Matt Birk to start Catholic high school in Burnsville

NFL veteran Matt Birk, father of eight, is leading fundraising efforts.

By Erin Adler Star Tribune

Retired NFL player and former Viking Matt Birk worries about 21st-century teenagers. Their mental health. Their moral compass. And especially their schooling.

"I just kind of felt a little bit unsatisfied with education, with our system, for a long time," said Birk, a Mendota Heights resident.

Birk, the father of eight children himself, isn't one to wait around for solutions. So this fall, he's starting a school.

The high school, to be called Unity, will be small, Catholic and located at Mary, Mother of the Church in Burnsville. It will cost less than other private schools, according to Birk, and its students will be taught both liberal arts and life skills.

"Students need more than reading, writing and arithmetic," he said. "I feel like there's a better way – the model is antiquated."

Birk attended Cretin-Derham Hall High School in St. Paul and Harvard University, then went on to play for the Vikings and the Baltimore Ravens. He retired six years ago and now makes a living as a speaker and entrepreneur, as well as dabbling in stand-up comedy. He's a committed Catholic who speaks out about his faith.

Last spring, Birk heard about a local businessman who had goals similar to his. He met up with Tom Bengtson, founder of Chesterton Academy, a



COURTNEY DEUTZ – SPECIAL TO THE STAR TRIBUNE Former NFL center Matt Birk spoke Saturday, May 4, 2019 at the Royal Cliff Banquet & Conference Center at a fundraiser for a Catholic high school he is starting called Unity High School.

Catholic school started in 2008 that has campuses in Edina and St. Paul. Bengtson was ready to open another school and eyeing the south metro as a possible location.

"I always wondered, why isn't there a Catholic [high] school south of the Minnesota River, south of 494?" Bengtson asked. There are 10 Catholic elementary schools in the area but no high school, he said.

"We're not trying to compete with anybody," Birk said. "We're a totally different product."

Birk said he and a few other major donors are funding the school until it gets off the ground. Unity will start

with freshmen and add grades over time. Birk's daughter will be in the first class this fall.

About a dozen kids have signed up so far. "That's pretty fantastic at this point," Birk said, adding that there are still many undecided students.

"A lot of parents don't want to be the first with an untried thing," said David Hall, whose daughter, Naomi, will attend Unity. "We're willing to take a chance."

Hall, a Lakeville resident whose children have gone to Catholic grade schools, said he was motivated by a desire to keep his kids "schooled in the faith."

Birk said he's impressed with the families who are on board. "They are making history," he said.

'IT'S GOING TO BE MODEST'

Catholic schools traditionally have been started by religious orders, so two lay people spearheading a high school is unusual, Bengtson said.

But it's not unheard of. In addition to Chesterton, Providence Academy in Plymouth was started two decades ago by one person, he said.

"In the past few decades, the archdiocese has been blessed to witness the beginning of many new Catholic schools," said Emily Dahdah, associate



These pieces were among several in a silent auction held to benefit the high school Birk is starting.

director of education for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Dahdah said new schools face challenges, including developing sustainable financial plans, selecting

curriculum, hiring teachers and drumming up community support.

In order for schools to be recognized by the archdiocese as Catholic institutions, they must go through a three-step process. Unity has completed the first stage. Until the other two are finished, Unity "will look and feel like a Catholic school," but won't have formal recognition or "Catholic" in its name, Bengtson said.

The school will integrate academics with religion and life skills. Students will attend mass three times a week, with "real-world Wednesdays" breaking up the week.

Birk said designing Wednesday's activities will be his responsibility once the school is off the ground. The day will be reserved for lessons on character, leadership, service and entrepreneurship with practical life skills — such as how to change the oil on a car — woven in. Wednesdays also will feature an "introduction to theater" class to hone communication skills.

The school plans to keep tuition at \$6,500 a year by leasing space at the church, minimizing electives and providing math and world languages through online programs. Computer-based instruction will allow the school to customize the pace and content of

those two subjects and hire just seven or eight staffers, counting the principal.

"The low-cost stuff, I think, is really important," Bengtson said. "We understand there's going to be trade-offs — it's going to be modest."

Many families want a small-school experience, Bengtson said, where students can develop meaningful relationships and work through the challenges of being a teenager.

Extracurriculars, including athletics, will be offered based on student interest, with parents helping out. "If your focus is going [Division I] in sports, then Unity probably isn't for you," Birk said.

The feedback received so far, he said, has been "incredible," with donations and support coming from at least 25 people across the United States. A recent fundraiser attracted hundreds of attendees.

"I think this really resonates with a lot of people," Birk said.

Birk said that some people, including his wife, Adrianna, have considered him "nuts" for wanting to open a school. But he said he had to try to change the status quo, which isn't working for many youth.

"I can't just sit by and hope," Birk said. "If God wants this to happen, it will happen."