

Why are Catholic schools so good at sports?

The national rankings of the country's top high school athletic teams possess a distinct Catholicity.

Mater Dei. De La Salle. St. Anthony. St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Pius X.

These aren't the names of parish churches. Catholic high schools are heavily represented on ESPN's national Top 25 lists in several sports, especially football, basketball, baseball and soccer.

There are competing theories to explain Catholic schools' athletic successes and the perception that they disproportionately outperform their public school counterparts on the playing fields.

Critics say Catholic schools, like many private schools, can draw students from a wider geographical area than public school systems, which are bound by district lines. Some suspect inappropriate recruiting, and seeing an uneven playing field, have called for new rules making it tougher for transfer students to play immediately for successful athletic programs. Others have proposed realigning conferences to have the powerhouse Catholic schools compete against traditionally strong public schools.

Standout Programs

The 2010-11 academic year was a banner season for Utah's three Catholic high schools.

The Diocese of Salt Lake City saw its high schools win state championships in football, girls soccer, boys cross country, as well as top-five finishes in other sports.

Juan Diego Catholic High School's football and baseball teams won their third consecutive state championships, while the girl's soccer team repeated as state champs for the second consecutive year. The volleyball team and the boys' soccer team were both state runners-up.

"We have fantastic young men and women at our Catholic schools," said Chris Long, athletic director of Juan Diego Catholic High School in Draper, Utah.

St. Joseph Catholic High School in Ogden, Utah, won state championships last year in girls soccer, boys cross country and boys golf. The girls cross country team also won its fourth consecutive state title. The school track team came within a couple of points of winning its fourth consecutive state championship.

"What is incredible is that for an unprecedented fifth year in a row, St. Joseph won the title of the best athletic program in the state in small high school classification given by the statewide newspaper Deseret Morning News," Alex Salvo, the athletic director and girls soccer coach at St. Joseph, told OSV.

Salvo told the Intermountain Catholic newspaper that the secret to the athletes' success was their commitment and dedication.

"They know we don't have the luxury of the bigger high schools, where students can play only one sport. Most of our students play two or three sports and that helps them stay organized and excel in everything they do, including academics," Salvo said.

Judge Memorial Catholic High School, located in Salt Lake City, had a freshman girl win two individual state track and field titles, in addition to setting a new state record anchoring the team's 400-yard relay team, which won its third straight state title and eighth championship in nine years.

Judge Memorial's boys lacrosse team also finished second place in the state tournament, while the boys tennis and golf teams were both ranked in the state's top five of their respective sports. The girls golf team also finished as region champions and third in the state.

Winning tradition

However, many Catholic high school coaches, athletic directors and leaders of Catholic Youth Organization sports teams say the uneven playing field argument misses the point.

“In my opinion, what truly makes Catholic sports so special and unique is the devotion, dedication and passion that the Catholic community, student-athletes, coaches, teachers, fans, administrators, etc., possess for their schools and teams,” said Chris Jung, director of operations for LouisvilleCatholicsports.com, a website that covers 10 local high schools, four colleges and almost 30 Catholic elementary schools in the Louisville, Ky., area.

Jung told Our Sunday Visitor that the issue of Catholic vs. non-Catholic athletics causes “constant debate” when broached.

“When it comes to Catholic/private school athletics, most parents, fans and others associated with public schools tend to get on the defensive and make the assumption that private programs and student-athletes are just handed everything. Facilities are better. Private schools take advantage of recruiting and scholarship opportunities of and for student-athletes. And the list goes on,” Jung said.

“However, the Catholic schools on those Top 10 and 25 lists have a lot of tradition. It comes down to their culture. It’s one of success. It irks me that people think that because some Catholic schools have these nice facilities, fields and athletic equipment, that it means when they walk on the field, people hand them a championship. That’s impossible.”

At an advantage?

Vic Michaels, director of the Detroit Catholic League, told OSV that people also believe that Catholic schools in Michigan have athletic advantages over public schools, but he argues

that the facts say otherwise. He noted that many Michigan public school systems have open enrollment, and accept several students from outside district lines.

“Last year in the state of Michigan, there were 97 state champions crowned, and 31 of them were not public schools, which is about the same percentage of nonpublic schools in our state,” Michaels said. “We won 31 percent of the state championships, so we’re not winning more. We’re winning about what we should.”

Still, the issue remains a point of contention. In May, Ohio’s 830 high school principals voted on a referendum that would have changed the way school teams were assigned to athletic divisions. The proposal sought to balance the playing field between private and public schools. According to published reports, the referendum – which was ultimately defeated by 29 votes – received significant attention after Ohio’s December state football finals, where five of the six state champs were Catholic schools.

Also, in 2002, the Washington Catholic Athletic Conference – considered to be one of the country’s premier high school athletic leagues – established a rule that forced athletes to sit out a full calendar year if they transferred from any school in the Washington D.C., area. Many coaches at both public and private schools, according to published reports, saw it as a positive step toward promoting parity and stopping a free-agent-type system of students looking to play for ascendant schools.

Jung conceded the validity of critics’ arguments that Catholic school teams enjoy an advantage in not being bound by district lines.

The Apostle to the Gentiles often incorporated allusions from the world of sports into his epistles.

Writing in the first century, St. Paul made several references to running the good race, shadowboxing, athletic training and the importance of Christians competing for an eternal crown instead of an athlete's laurel crown.

"I jokingly refer to him as the first sportswriter," said Ray McKenna, founder and president of Catholic Athletes for Christ (www.catholicathletesforchrist.com/).

"Sports parlance is in mainstream language. Sports has a huge effect on the whole world, for better or for worse," said McKenna, who has served in sports-related ministry for 15 years, including ministries associated with Major League Baseball, professional football and boxing and youth sports programs.

McKenna, a participant in the first-ever Vatican sports conference in 2005, told OSV that he is writing a book focusing on the "theology of sports" to promote a holistic Catholic view of athletic competition.

"Sports, properly understood, is directed at the perfect integration of body, mind and soul. That is the Catholic perspective," McKenna said. "Sports and faith are on the opposite sides of the same coin. Some people have a view that they are entirely unrelated, but they can inform each other."

Sacrificing for the team's greater good, dedicating oneself to practice, watching out for a teammate's well-being, persevering through losing streaks and enjoying the fruits of hard work are all lessons that translate into the "real world," and can be used as catechetical examples of living the Catholic faith. "My friend David Eckstein (a Major League shortstop) was told he was too short to play baseball, but he persevered to be the MVP of the World Series, despite how many people doubted him. The same virtue of fortitude is important for our faith," McKenna said.

Catholic Athletes for Christ is working with the Vatican's sports office to promote the Church's mission in the United States. McKenna said his nonprofit organization is dedicated to assisting Catholic athletes at all levels to practice and share their faith with teammates. The nonprofit also organizes retreats and is launching pilot programs for high school Catholic student-athletes.

"If you're being Catholic in how you approach sports, then you are engaged in a tremendous endeavor to promote virtue," he said. "People think of athletes today, and they think of vice. Sports is not usually seen in a positive vein. We're trying to turn that upside down, a full 180 degrees."

Integrating the Gospel

Leonard DiPaul, assistant dean at Neumann University in Aston, Pa., told OSV that it was important for Catholic athletes to integrate the Gospel in their training and competition.

"I do believe and will always believe that in and through the filter of our Catholic mission, there are numerous opportunities for players, coaches and parents to reflect Gospel values and to mirror discipleship and to evangelize, bring the Good News, through sports," said DiPaul, who has served as an interim director and chair for the National Center for Catholic Youth Sports.

"Any athlete gifted with great athletic talent should have gratitude, and be joyful for it. It's a gift from God," McKenna said.

“Since that’s the system, a private school has the ability to attract people from outside district lines. There are no lines. They can attract the best students, the best athletes. Anybody interested and willing to make the financial sacrifices to get to the private school has the ability to do so.”

That WCAC story also raised lingering suspicions in many quarters that private and Catholic schools recruit the best athletes. But others say that is too simplistic.

“While it is technically true that anybody, any parent can send their child to a Catholic school, they can also choose to leave for any number of reasons, whereas in public schools, particularly in a small community, that’s their only choice. They have to stay there unless the parents want to drive their kids a long way to go for school,” said Chris Long, athletic director of Juan Diego Catholic High School in Draper, Utah.

Juan Diego Catholic High School’s football and baseball teams both won their third consecutive state championships last season, while the school’s girls soccer team won its second straight state title. This success has occurred at a school that did not open its doors until 1999 and that has a student population of around 800 students.

Long attributes the success to the quality of his school’s students.

“It’s a fallacy that anybody can go to a Catholic school. That is not true,” Long said.

“If you won’t shave, fail to be respectful in class, and don’t follow the policies of the schools, then you can’t go there. There are no tattoos allowed. The boys have to wear shirts and ties to Mass,” he added. “A lot of people in today’s society will say, ‘Who are you to tell me what my child has to wear to school?’ Well, that’s what we do.”

Stable environments

Along with uniquely disciplined athletes, Long and other Catholic sports officials say their schools also often have talented and hardworking coaching staffs dedicated to their respective schools, creating a stable environment that fosters achievement and a culture of winning.

“Since our founding, we’ve had the same football head coach, the same defensive and offensive coordinators,” Long said. “There is a philosophy of how we do things here, and the kids buy into that. Their parents also buy into it. Whether or not that means we perform better than non-Catholic teams, I don’t know. We have very good non-Catholic teams in our area and good competition around here, but we just happen to have consistency in coaching.”

“I think our schools just do a better job of coaching the students and giving them a stable program,” said Michaels, whose 27-team league won eight Michigan state championships last year in several sports, including football. “We’re still pretty strong in that sport,” he said.

Philip Bellomo, athletic director of Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana, Calif., also attributed his school’s athletic successes to a combination of good coaching and devoted student-athletes.

“Certainly we have had talented players, but I don’t know if our players are anymore significantly talented than other schools’ student-athletes,” Bellomo told OSV.

In the last two years, Mater Dei’s girls basketball team has won regional, state and national championships, leading Bellomo to comment: “They’ve hit the trifecta. I don’t know if we’ll ever see that again.”

Mater Dei’s 24 sports teams have won 60 regional championships, 13 state championships and five national titles

since 1950. ESPN ranked the school's basketball team eighth in the country last year, when it went 32-2. The boys water polo team, meanwhile, has won three consecutive California Interscholastic Federation, Southern Section, championships.

Coaching Virtue

Successful Catholic coaches are not only measured by wins and losses.

How well they help form young men and women in the faith is just as important, says Paul Mach, program coordinator for National CYO Sports.

“Coaches are youth ministers. They need to be passing on important lessons like, ‘How do we deal with losing?’ Coaches have that kind of responsibility,” Mach told Our Sunday Visitor.

The National CYO Sports, a service of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, educates leaders about opportunities in sports for evangelization, catechesis and growing in knowledge of Jesus Christ. The idea is to instill Gospel values in Catholic youth sports to encourage young people to live as Christian disciples.

“National CYO Sports as an organization helps coaches to not only see how are they helping their kids in athletic competition, but also to get them asking, ‘Am I giving them the virtues they need to be a great human being?’” Mach said.

“It’s more than just that sport. It’s also building up in the individual the virtues that they should be learning through competition. The competitiveness can destroy some of that perspective at times.”

Mach told OSV that his organization provides training in “Catholic coaching principles” through online seminars and other resources.

Topics include appropriate disciplining strategies, seizing on teachable moments and integrating Catholic values into all realms of training and competing.

“It’s not so much about knowing the best way to coach how to throw a football or shoot a basketball, though we go into those things, too, but also, ‘How do you deal with the kids? How do you handle situations in the heat of the moment? Are you degrading someone, or are you lifting them up?’

“Whether it’s a Catholic high school, college or a CYO program, the coaches have to truly understand there are essential Catholic principles to coaching,” Mach said.

“The question is, ‘Can we teach people about our faith through sports?’ We believe yes. Sports can be such an evangelizational tool that if you have good men coaching who can share their faith well, it just makes it that more powerful.”

For more information on National CYO Sports resources for coaches, visit www.nationalcyosports.org

“We have been fortunately blessed to have success in a variety of areas in our athletic program because we have good players and good coaches [who] work very, very hard to be successful. That is what makes Mater Dei Mater Dei,” Bellomo told OSV. “We don’t have athletic scholarships, contrary to what people think. We have tuition-needs assistance, but anyone is eligible to apply for that.”

Bellomo suggested that Catholic schools such as Mater Dei create “a self-fulfilling prophecy” with their athletic achievements.

“Because the school has so much tradition in athletics, obviously the school markets itself with that in mind. It’s known both locally, statewide and even nationally,” he said. “Certainly, elite athletes and many guys want to come to Mater Dei. But at the end of the day, can they afford it? Can they adapt to the school’s culture and requirements? Those are issues that need to be played out.”

Transcendent values

The conversation over championships and winning traditions is important, but observers say it can also threaten to cloud what is supposed to be sports’ central role in integrating the virtues of physical fitness, sportsmanship and perseverance into the lives of Catholic students.

“A diocese, which I won’t name, recently had a high school close, and one of the arguments against the closing was that the school football team had won a state championship. Shouldn’t the main priority be about being Catholic first?” said Paul Mach, program coordinator of National CYO Sports, who told OSV that while perspective is needed, sports carry an inherent ability in helping form young people.

“The idea of what is good sportsmanship comes into play in your everyday life. The lessons of winning gracefully, losing

with dignity are important. The losing and winning can also really teach you about the Paschal Mystery, too. Overcoming losses in their lives later on can be something they learned through sports.”

Ray McKenna, founder and president of Catholic Athletes for Christ, told OSV that high school athletic teams can become successful if they truly internalize virtues of practice and perseverance, which are vitally important for the spiritual life.

Team Spirit

“One Team. One Goal.”

“No I In Team.”

In the last decade, Catholic high school teams across the country have taken to printing slogans on T-shirts.

“A lot of teams on an annual basis really like the idea of coming up with a team motto they can form their entire season around,” said Chris Jung, director of operations for LouisvilleCatholicSports.com.

“It’s a way of defining that year’s team. It’s almost a given now that you will see these team shirts being printed before every season.”

“There are transcendent values that we can learn from sports. First, practice reminds us that no matter how talented you are, you just can’t show up the day of the game and expect to succeed. It’s the same thing with our faith. You just can’t say you’re Catholic and not partake in the sacraments, not having a daily prayer life. These are all parts of being ready for the moment and being prepared.”

At Juan Diego Catholic High School, Long said the sports program can be compared with a front porch.

“It’s not the most important room, but the most visible part of the house. It’s part of the whole education process of our students,” Long said.

“Athletic competition is not necessarily a stand-alone element of a Catholic education. It’s a piece of the whole puzzle, which includes the academic, intellectual, spiritual and community service elements. Sports is integral to the growth of all our students. It’s no more or less important than anything else.”

Brian Fraga writes from Massachusetts.