



Holy Angels, Villa Walsh and St. Elizabeth share distinction as disqualification-free schools

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Before Grace Gehm played in her first sporting event as a freshman at Academy of St. Elizabeth, she and the other athletes were presented with an important fact during a group meeting.

Her school, located in Convent Station in Morris County, had never had an athlete or coach disqualified from an interscholastic competition since the NJSIAA began compiling ejection reports in 1991.

What she wasn't aware of after that initial meeting is that of the more than 430 schools who belong to the NJSIAA, St. Elizabeth was one of just three members - Villa Walsh Academy and Academy of Holy Angels are the others - who've been disqualification free for that entire time.

Gehm is now a senior at St. Elizabeth, where she plays soccer, basketball and lacrosse. The streak at her school is very much alive and well. The same goes for Villa Walsh and Holy Angels.

"I remember back to my freshman year, any sport I played, they always started off each season telling us about how we play with good sportsmanship and that we've kept this going for a while and want to keep it that way," she said.

Make no mistake, the athletes are encouraged to play hard. But playing hard and doing so with respect toward others are not mutually exclusive concepts.

"It's important to be aggressive and play a sport to the best of your ability," said Caroline O'Callaghan, another St. Elizabeth soccer captain who is also a track athlete. "But at the same time, you need to do it respectfully toward opponents and officials."

The achievement of being disqualification-free for 33 years is a source of great pride at each school, and one they are determined to continue into the future.

"It reflects on our school and the environment we've been surrounded by," added Alea Bediner, another St. Elizabeth soccer captain."

That's an attitude which makes Kelly Abner, the athletic director at St. Elizabeth, proud of her athletes and coaches, as well as those who've preceded them.



St. Elizabeth Athletic Director Kelly Abner is flanked by girls soccer captains Caroline O'Callaghan, Grace Gehm and Alea Bediner.

“I am beyond excited to know that we are one of the three remaining schools in the state who’ve never had an athlete or coach disqualified since the NJSIAA started tracking disqualifications,” she said. “At the Academy, sportsmanship is essential to game success. Without it, we would not grow with respect for others in the school community, and gameday traditions and experiences would not help all student-athletes rise to the occasion to be the best that they could be. It should be the foundation of every student-athlete.”

That attitude also holds true just a few miles away at Villa Walsh Academy in Morris Township.

“A school like ours, one of the first things I talk about when I interview a coach is sportsmanship,” said Villa Walsh athletic director Jen Fleury. “It really matters to us. We have an annual coaches meeting and we reiterate and talk about it again, and we stress that it’s not just talk. We wholeheartedly believe in developing and building the whole athlete, and sportsmanship has got to be a big part of that.”

The athletes at Villa Walsh have understood that message about sportsmanship, and how it should be reflected by their conduct in competition.

“I think as a school, sportsmanship in general is very important to us and helps bring us a closer together,” said Delaney Caughey, a three-sport athlete and the president of her school’s Athletic Leadership Council. “It’s a great way for us to respect each other, the other teams and the officials. We’re very passionate about that.”

It’s also clear to the Villa Walsh athletes that playing hard, while competing with sportsmanship and respect toward others, is a deeply-rooted part of their overall education.



Villa Walsh AD Jen Fleury with student-athletes Jane Dufner, Sarah Chambeau, Mary Bowers, Ava Simmons, Sheridan Caughey & Delaney Caughey.



Long-time Holy Angels softball and basketball coach Sue Liddy with athletes Kate Qureshi and Scarlett Mazzola.

“A lot of the values that we’re taught at our school by our teachers and faculty and also by Mrs. Fleury and the athletic staff, is that respect is super important, and in order to be a leader on a team, you have to demonstrate that,” said Sarah Chambeau, who is a tennis player in the fall. “That example kind of gets passed down through the generations on our teams.”

The message of sportsmanship and respect towards opponents and officials also holds true at Academy of the Holy Angels in Demarest.

A prime fixture at the Bergen County school is Sue Liddy, who has been basketball coach for the past 48 years while also coaching the softball team for more than 30. She additionally

served as athletic director from 1988 through 2001.

“This is a tremendous source of pride for our school,” she said. “It shows that our kids respect the game and opponents. You have to respect the game, and play the game as a game. And as a coach, it’s for the kids. It’s not all about you. When you have good kids that respect, listen and do what you ask them to do, it’s easy.”

For the Holy Angels athletes, it’s also about approaching competition not just with respect, but also with perspective.

“Our team, every year, we are more than a team, we’re a family,” said Holy Angels softball player Kate Qureshi. “Over the season we get closer and closer, and at the end of the day, we’re all here just have fun. We’re high schoolers. We just want to have fun together. It’s just a game, that we all love and play. The other team, they’re here just like we are and they’re kids like us, so there’s no point in causing any trouble about anything.”

“I had no idea that that there only three schools that have done this,” said Scarlett Mazzola, her softball teammate. “But I would expect that from our school. We’re a good group of kids, and it’s important to respect other players and officials.”

The respect toward officials is something that is more important than ever, since there is a deepening shortage of officials in all sports.

The athletes and coaches at the three disqualification-free schools are aware of that, and have also made that a part of their conduct.

“We’ve all been made very aware that there’s an officials shortage, so we’ve been taught how important it is to respect them,” said Jane Dufner, a student-athlete at Villa Walsh. “We appreciate their work and they deserve our respect.”