

Private Playgrounds

Some of the area's private schools have fabulous sports facilities. But they're not trying to outdo each other. Really, they're not

By Sarah Lyon

Visit Georgetown Prep's 92-acre campus and it's easy to see why many say the North Bethesda school's athletic facilities rival those of a small college.

Its \$23 million Hanley Center for Athletic Excellence, completed in 2007, has a basketball arena with room for more than 1,000 spectators, an 11-lane pool, an indoor track, four indoor basketball courts, a wrestling room, a 6,000-square-foot fitness center and more. The all-boys school is also home to 12 tennis courts, a baseball field with batting cages, a training field, three additional fields for soccer and lacrosse, a stadium with artificial turf and a nine-hole golf course.

A few miles away, students at Bethesda's Landon School also enjoy similarly posh facilities. The Joshua M. Freeman Center for Athletic Achievement, which opened in 2008, includes a wrestling room, cardio room, and strength and conditioning facilities. The school is in the process of renovating its T. Edward Barton Alumni Sports Center, which has two gymnasiums, over the next five years. Landon also boasts an outdoor pool, an artificial turf field for soccer, football and lacrosse, three additional soccer and lacrosse fields, two baseball fields, a multipurpose field, 12 tennis courts, a track and a multisport blacktop.

Little wonder that some observers say private schools are engaged in the equivalent of an arms race to attract students with their spectacular sports facilities. Not surprisingly, though, the schools' athletic directors say that isn't the case.

At Landon, the Freeman Center renovation cost about \$2.7 million, with funds raised through the school's Landon United campaign, according to Director of Communications Jean Erstling. That and the \$5 million renovation of the Barton Center "represented the first major improvement to the gym facility at Landon in 30 years," she says. Landon's strategic plan specifically states that the school will resist " 'arms race' competition among peer schools to build more-elaborate new facilities...[and] where appropriate, refurbish and remodel, rather than build anew."

Prep's previous athletic center was nearly 50 years old when the Hanley Center was built with funds after the school leased 4 acres to a luxury condo development, a controversial decision. "Things get old, and what you need to do is provide—like all the public schools do—certain things that enable your student body to become better," says Dan Paro, Georgetown Prep's athletic director and head football coach.

Private schools in the area fund their athletic programs mainly through tuition and fees, according to their athletic directors. Many pay for students' uniforms and equipment, and cover the cost of transportation to local games. Georgetown Prep and Landon in Bethesda and the Bullis School in Potomac all declined to provide specific figures for their budgets. However, Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in Olney, with about 1,200 students, has a budget of \$400,000 to cover teams, transportation, uniforms and referees. Compare that with Bethesda's Walt Whitman—home to more than 1,900 students—which spent \$238,000 last year.

Prep requires students to participate in at least one sport as freshmen and sophomores, with many continuing as upperclassmen. Paro says about 380 of the school's 480 students play at least one sport. But he says sports are just one aspect of student life. "[Athletics are] part of our educational beliefs and foundation," he says, "just as music, the arts and all our other extracurricular programs."

The Bullis School requires its students to participate in two activities a year—with one of them a sport during freshman and sophomore years. Bullis has been something of a leader in athletic upgrades. In 1997, it became the first school in its league to have

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—**BOB MILLOY**

head football coach at Our Lady of Good Counsel

stadium lights. It also was one of the first schools in the county to install artificial turf in its stadium, which was renovated in 2005. The school is now redoing its baseball stadium.

But overall, “it’s very important to balance out all the activities that our student athletes do,” says Andres Parra, the boys’ athletic director and varsity soccer coach.

Michael Derwinski, a teacher who was the acting athletic director at Landon last year, says athletics are “a complementary component of [Landon’s] academic program,” with teachers serving as coaches and students required to play an intramural or team sport every season.

Derwinski acknowledges that “a good percentage of inquiries about admissions to Landon are fueled in no small way by an interest in the athletic component.” However, “there’s a league-wide agreement that we will not go out and recruit athletes,” he says, referring to the Interstate Athletic Conference (IAC), which includes Landon, Georgetown Prep (competing in every sport except football), St. Albans, St. Stephens & St. Agnes, Episcopal High and Bullis.

Rather, Derwinski says, “what I have seen here over the years is that sometimes athletes will try to recruit us. There have been a number of boys over the

years who applied to Landon to be a part of the lacrosse program.” Like any student, athletes must go through the school’s standard admissions process, which is “based almost entirely on the academic aspect of their application,” he says.

Our Lady of Good Counsel does recruit athletes. It competes in the Washington Catholic Athletic Conference (WCAC), which does not have a policy against recruitment (though it restricts how schools can go about the pursuit). And head football coach Bob Milloy says prospective students must meet Good Counsel’s academic requirements.

In 2007, Good Counsel added a facility with two gymnasiums and a weight room. And in 2009 the school installed an \$850,000 artificial turf field. The school also has a baseball stadium with new dugouts, a softball field and five practice fields, says former Athletic Director Pat Bates, the interim principal at the school.

Still, private school athletic directors and coaches say parents of middle-school students more often learn of an institution from reading the sports section of the local newspaper than from hearing about its sports facilities. “[They] see Good Counsel kids holding a trophy up and it attracts attention, it attracts ad-

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mission," Milloy says.

Though Good Counsel does not require students to participate in a sport, the school has 46 teams competing at the freshman, junior varsity and varsity levels. Officials estimate that 60 percent to 70 percent of stu-

dents are on a team. "If you have a successful football season, it just starts the year off on a positive foot," Milloy says, and "you look forward to coming to school on Monday if your team does well." In the fall of 2009 and 2010, *The Washington Post*

ranked Good Counsel's football team No. 1 in the paper's circulation area.

Milloy, who coached in Montgomery County public schools for 31 years, says Good Counsel attracts the attention of college coaches. "I always tell the eighth-graders, 'If you come here and you advance academically and athletically and football-wise, I can't promise you a scholarship, but I promise you [coaches] will know who you are.'"

Milloy says coaches from 88 colleges across the nation visited Good Counsel during a four-week recruiting period in April and May. He estimates the number of coaches visiting public schools at 15 or 20, although James Kuhn, football coach at Walt Whitman, says 35 to 40 college coaches visited the public school in Bethesda last year. "If you're good enough, they're going to find you. It doesn't matter where you go," Kuhn says.

Milloy sees things differently. "They go where the players are," he says. "We cater to the coaches."

And it helps to attract the players if the athletic facilities are first class—though the athletic directors say that's not the goal. "The money that's invested in athletics leads to the development of a more complete and more well-rounded individual," Prep's Paro says. "What it does [is] it helps enhance the entire educational program of the institution." ■

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