

Catholic High School well-represented at Super Bowl LIX

written by Dwain Hebda |



Two former Catholic High School students, Maj. Nathan Sampson and Jonah Monroe, participated in the recent Super Bowl flyover as an MV-22B Osprey pilot and an NFL official, respectively, highlighting their journey from high school to the ultimate game.

Junior chosen as new face of Mount St. Mary's Betty Belle

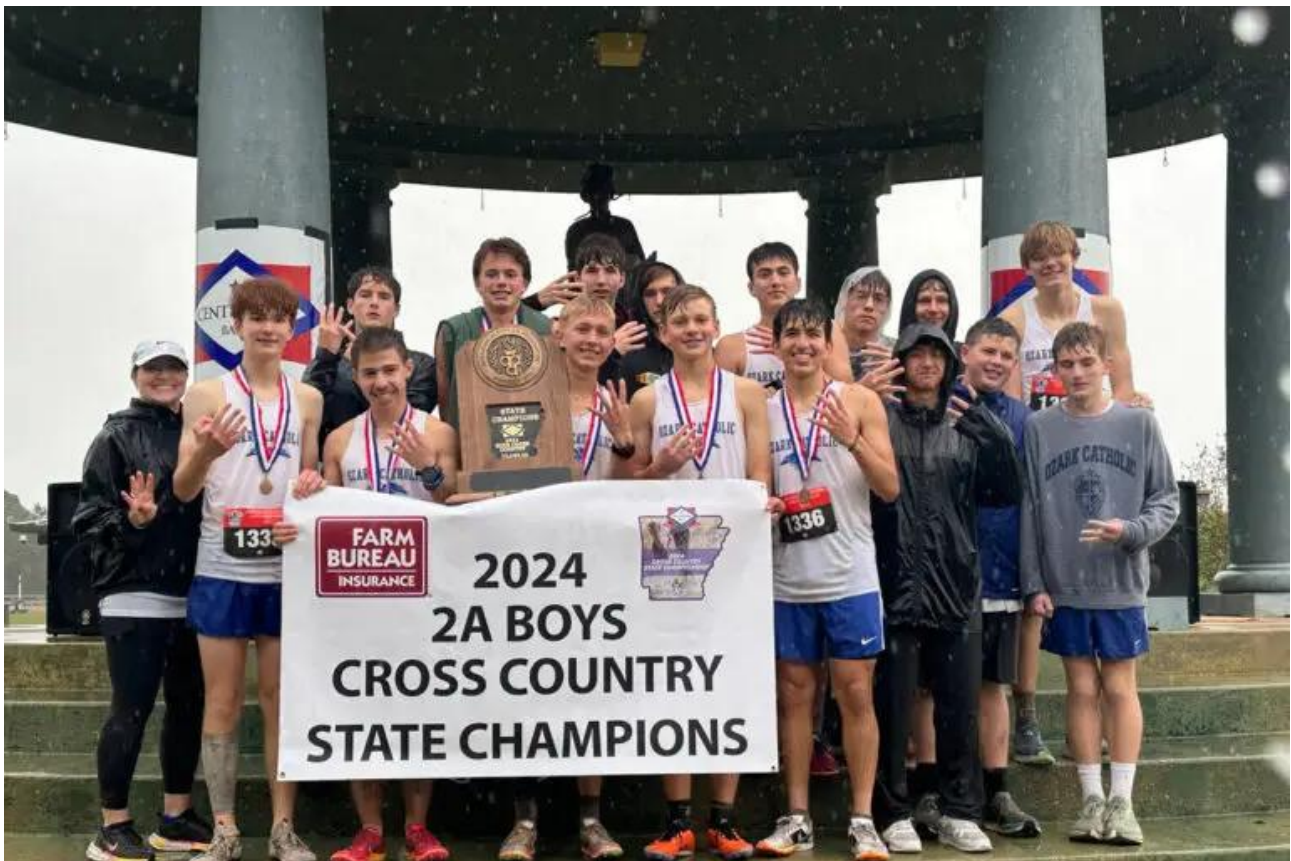
written by Dwain Hebda |



Tatum Smith, a junior at Mount St. Mary Academy, has assumed the role of Betty Belle, the school's newly introduced costumed mascot, and has been relishing the opportunity, even earning an All-American mascot award at the Citrus Bowl football game in Orlando, Florida.

OCA senior maintains his pace with another XC state title

written by Dwain Hebda |



Isaac Pohlmeier, senior running phenom for the Ozark Catholic Academy Griffins, is rarely stumped in interviews. Being one of the more heralded athletes to come out of middle school in run-crazy northwest Arkansas, he's fielded questions since his days of dominating the competition at St. Joseph School in Fayetteville.

But in the closing moments of this interview a question flew at him that caused him to stop and take serious stock of his running career.

Just how many high school state golds has he won, anyway?

"Umm, well, I've won three individual state cross country titles and part of four team titles," he began. "We won one track team title and then, let's see, I've won the mile my first three years, so that's three, and then the two-mile twice, so that's five, and then I've won the 800 twice, so that's seven."

He pauses, then adds quickly, "I don't know if these count, but I've been on the state championship four-by-1800-meter relay twice as well."

The fact that Pohlmeier has to stop and think about being a 17-time state champ says it all about the senior who, along with the two graduating classes ahead of him and his fellow senior mates, have laid the groundwork for a running dynasty at small, close-knit OCA. At the head of that column has been the slight but powerful strider Pohlmeier who has set the pace literally and figuratively for the past four years.

"We were confident going in that, even though we've got the target on our back, and we were the team that everyone was trying to beat, if we just ran our own race and ran the way we knew we could run it'd all work itself out," he said. "We just wanted to win as big as possible."

As final acts go, the 2024 2A state meet, held Nov. 7-8 at Oaklawn in Hot Springs, was a humdinger. The Griffins were running in a new classification for the first time, having decimated the competition in 1A as threepeat state cross-country champions. The move was supposed to level the playing field by pushing OCA up against larger schools and, theoretically, stiffer competition.

Thing is, theories don't always hold up, especially in athletics where the human spirit and drive can lay the best-placed logic to waste, much like the Griffins did this year. In addition to Pohlmeier smoking the state field, finishing nearly a full minute ahead of teammate Joey Squillance in second place, the Griffins all clustered in the top 11 placements.

In a sport where low score wins, the meet was a laugher with the Griffins finishing 69 points ahead of second-place Caddo Hills. And all this, mind you, under gray, rainy skies that turned the course into a boggy mud slick.

"Super muddy, a bunch of puddles and water and mud all over the course. It was mostly just a fight to get your legs to warm up because it was so cold," Pohlmeier said. "It was a fight to get through that mud, because every time you would step you would sink into the ground instead of bouncing off the grass like usual.

"A lot of it was just strength, being confident in your leg strength and knowing that once you stepped into it, you could push yourself up thanks to the constant training you did for months to get your legs stronger."

Pohlmeier was quick to credit the efforts of the team from top to bottom but saved special praise for his senior teammate Squillance.

"I knew we had a good shot to win big again this year and (Squillance) and I just kept pushing each other in practice," he said. "We kept each other accountable on weekends, we'd go on long runs and push each other. We wanted to go out with the first (2A state title) in OCA history."

The teammates have one last hurrah at the high school level — looking to avenge last year's narrow upset loss in track and field team scoring — before stepping into the next chapter. For Pohlmeier, that means running for Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia next season while studying kinesiology. He and Squillance leave OCA knowing the program is in very good hands.

In addition to juniors, particularly Ben Frederick and Liam Burney, "I have an eighth-grade brother who runs cross country; he'll go to OCA next year," Pohlmeier said. He described the oncoming Dominic Pohlmeier as "pretty good" before his competitive streak kicked in.

"I mean, he's slower than what I was running as an eighth grader, but only by about 30 or 40 seconds," he said with a big brother grin. "He's pretty quick. Just not as quick as I was."

Head Rocket lauds effort as football season comes to end

written by Dwain Hebda |



As coaching debuts go, Coach Richard Cochran saw a lot to like in his first season as skipper of the Little Rock Catholic High School football program. The Rockets posted a 9-2 record, including opening the season with seven straight wins and with only one regular-season loss.

For Cochran, the first Catholic High alum to lead his alma mater's football program, the accomplishments of the season were many.

"There's a calmness to this team, the confidence that, 'Hey, we can get this drive,'" Cochran said. "There's been two or three games where we needed to ice the game in the fourth quarter to win because the other team was getting momentum, and they were catching up and our guys just took it. They never showed any panic mode, you know, it's just a gritty group."

In the regular season, Catholic outscored their opponents by nearly nine points per game and that's counting the 42-0 drubbing at the hands of perennial state power Benton. More than half of CHS' wins were by double digits, and three were by 20 points or more, including an early win in Texas at the annual Catholic Bowl that Cochran said set the team's confident mindset for the year.

The second loss of the year, unfortunately, came in the state 6A playoffs, where Catholic enjoyed a first-round bye, which Cochran said was sorely needed for the team to get healthy in preparation for a title run. One week didn't prove to be enough, however, as CHS ran into a

well-oiled squad from Mountain Home on their home War Memorial Stadium field Nov. 22. Fresh off a first-round 57-50 shootout with Sheridan the week before, the Bombers picked up where they left off, bouncing the favored Rockets from the 6A playoffs for the second straight year 42-14. Turnovers and mistakes doomed the home team, as did the potent running attack of the visitors, which sent Mountain Home to its first state semi-final in nearly two decades.

True to its nature, Catholic hung tough, cutting the lead to 21-14 in the third quarter, only to have the ensuing kickoff returned 92 yards, a gut punch from which CHS would not recover. Cochran's remarks after the disappointing outcome showed consummate sportsmanship, praising the victors and complimenting his team's efforts and looking ahead to the future.



Catholic High Rockets lock arms to sing the alma mater for the final time this season after their loss to Mountain Home Nov. 22 during the 6A playoffs in Little Rock. (Deanna McGill)

"I think the offensive line was probably our biggest surprise this season," he told *Arkansas Catholic*. "I thought we were going to struggle early because we had some newer players and guys who hadn't seen a lot of Friday night experience. We had our three-year starter Sam Paladino at center, and he pretty much had the monopoly on experience. Everybody else was trying to figure it out as they went. They were really green and yet they were able to hold their own early on in the season and from there they were able to take control of games even if we were falling behind."

Cochran was particularly impressed with the way the team rallied in the face of myriad injuries up and down the roster.

"We had to play defense by committee a lot," he said. "We lost four starting seniors due to ACL injury this year, for the season. He had a player crack his vertebrae. We really had to rely on that gritty teamwork, that brotherhood guys felt where one guy gets hurt, the next guy steps up. We've been rotating defensive backs and linebackers and everybody's getting a chance to

play and just try to figure something out, and trying to find who can anchor those spots.”

Having completed three seasons in 6A, it is clear Catholic High is in the correct classification after suffering for decades in 7A with school several times its size. Over that period, the Rockets are 27-7, counting playoffs — including the 2022 season where it posted the first undefeated regular season record in school history — and have made the post season each year. Cochran said while there are clearly power schools at this level, he’s confident the Rockets are poised for future success as they continue to chase their first state football title since the 1980s.

“We got kind of plagued with some injuries throughout the season, but we’re not going to make an excuse,” he said. “The way guys stepped in as backups and held their own pretty well, that’s a bright light for the future. One thing you can’t take away from them is that brotherhood, you know? They’ve busted it all year and with the exception of the Benton game where the boys were not happy with what they did, they always showed the grit to hang in there and fight. I’m so proud of them.”

Catholic high schools compete in volleyball

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |



Historic year: Ozark Catholic Academy’s volleyball team made history by advancing to the semifinal round of the 2A state volleyball tournament in Hackett. The Griffins beat Cutter-Morning Star 3-1 Oct. 29, then topped Marshall the next day, 3-2. The ride ended Oct. 31, 3-0,

at the hands of England. Sophie McClelland and Meghan Estes were each named all-state tourney, and Estes was also named all-state.

Lady Bulldogs: St. Joseph High School in Conway's volleyball team won its first match in the 2A state volleyball tournament. The squad handled Izard County Oct. 29, 3-1, then fell to host Hackett 3-0 the following day. St. Joseph players receiving individual accolades included Anna Nabholz, who was named to the all-state tourney team. Nabholz and teammates Hollie Morgan and Kate Nabholz all received all-state honors.

Belles win, lose: It was a short 5A state volleyball tourney for the Belles of Mount St. Mary Academy. The squad beat Sheridan 3-0 Oct. 29, then fell 3-0 to Shiloh Christian the following day. The tournament was played in Van Buren. Hannah and Taylor Wherry were each named to the all-state team while Hannah also took home all-state tourney honors.

Tennis player-priest starts team at Little Rock middle school

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



As Father Daniel Velasco, pastor of Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock, stands on the spongy court of the Rebsamen Tennis Center Oct. 10, he adjusts his hat to block the sun, tapping his clipboard as eight boys gather around.

Father Velasco tells the students, in sixth through eighth grades, who is playing against who

and on which court.

Father Velasco started the Holy Souls School tennis team in August. And while the tennis team and league are not regulated by the Arkansas Activities Association, the team has given students an opportunity to try their hand at a new sport and make friends with students from other schools.

"We started this year, thanks to some volunteers who helped me coordinate and talk to the other coaches," he said. "...I'm in charge of the lineups. There's a lot of coordination that takes place behind the scenes. We have some parents who step up and that's the reason we're able to do it."

Father Velasco said the Holy Souls team will play informally against Pulaski County private schools, including Anthony School, Pulaski Academy and Episcopal Collegiate School.

On Oct. 10, the Holy Souls team, in their white tennis uniforms, squared off against St. Anthony School in bright red, spanning four adjoining courts for their matches.

"This is our third match," Father Velasco said. "We played against Anthony School last week, then we played against Little Rock Christian Academy last Tuesday. This is our third match and we're playing against Anthony again. I think we're going to have about six matches total."

For Father Velasco, tennis is much more than a hobby.

"It is definitely a lot of fun," he said. "Because, as some people may know, I played college tennis."

Originally from Puebla, Mexico, Father Velasco's tennis skills brought him to the United States in 1993 when the tennis coach of Harding University in Searcy was impressed with his skills during a recruiting trip and offered him a scholarship. He played with the Harding tennis team for four years until he graduated in 1997. Since his ordination in 2020, Father Velasco has encouraged students and parishioners to take up tennis.

In 2021 and 2022, Father Velasco, who was then chaplain at Trinity School in Fort Smith, helped coach the middle school's coed tennis team of 15 players to win the championship.

His talents as a coach were reflected Oct. 10, as several teams showcased impressive volleys and even rallied from behind to win their matches.

Doubles partners sixth-grader Tucker Norton and eighth-grader Cade Cosse were losing to Anthony School 4-2 when the two came back and won their match in a 7-point tiebreak. The tiebreak offered the Holy Souls players a learning opportunity, as parents and Father Velasco taught the students the rules of the tiebreak as they played since the students had never played one before.

"I just really like the sport; it's fun to play," Norton told *Arkansas Catholic* after winning his match. "I think I did OK, but I could have done better."

Norton's mother, Barrett, who plays tennis, helped teach students on both teams how to play the 7-point tiebreak. She said Holy Souls played well, noting that the atmosphere isn't about winning but about having fun.

“They have that camaraderie with teammates and get along and talk,” Barrett Norton said.

Norton’s teammate, Cosse, analyzed Norton’s and his performance after the match.

“I feel like we could have done better, we definitely could have swung for the ball more,” he said. “Overall, we played really well, and I told (Norton), ‘Don’t give up,’ because they were beating us, and I was like, ‘We’re going to beat them,’ and we did. We just had to stick to it.”

Cosse, who has been playing tennis for four years, said the sport as a whole is about mental endurance just as much as physical endurance.

“Listen to your coach,” he advised new players. “It’s a very frustrating sport. It’s very mental. It will get to your head. You have to stay cool, be strong.”

Father Velasco said the tennis matches have provided a great opportunity for players to make friends and build their skills.

“We are playing against other schools that have some kids playing tennis, and we’re in agreement to play each other and have fun,” he said. “There’s no trophy, but I like to keep the score in my notes. It’s given me an opportunity to interact with the kids in a different environment. Of course, I’m still their pastor, but at the tennis court, I’m their coach, and they listen, and they are good kids.”

Head Hog addresses full house at Catholic alumni event

written by Dwain Hebda |



There was a time — four decades, actually — when John Calipari would have been ill at home at the thought of a speaking gig in Arkansas.

The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame coach had been the bane of many a Division I college basketball program, Arkansas' included, having won twice as much as he lost in his career against the Hogs.

That was then, this is now.

Since being hired as the head men's basketball coach for the University of Arkansas six months ago, Calipari Mania has been sweeping the Natural State. So when the news broke that he would be the guest speaker at Catholic High School's annual alumni dinner in Little Rock Oct. 10, just a couple of weeks ahead of the Hogs' first game in the Calipari era, it quickly became the hottest ticket in Arkansas.

"(Former Razorback basketball player and Little Rock parishioner) Joe Kleine, who I coached when I was the head coach of the (NBA's New Jersey) Nets, asked me if I believed in free speech," Calipari quipped about the gig. "And I said, I absolutely believe in free speech. He said, 'Good, you're giving one up at Catholic High School in October.'"

As much as the Hogs' coach was here for public relations, to backslap for NIL donations or to plead for patience as his version of Razorback basketball takes shape, his theme for the night's appearance before 800 enthusiastic alumni was faith.



Razorback head basketball coach John Calipari addresses the media before speaking at the Catholic High alumni dinner in Little Rock Oct. 10. (Dwain Hebda)

“The biggest thing I’m gonna tell you, I am a poor, miserable sinner,” he said to a small contingent of reporters prior to the speech, which was closed to the media. “My faith is a part of who I am and how I deal with things. But I think some of the best sermons are the ones without a spoken word. It’s what you do and how you do things and how you treat people.”

“I’m more of that guy who, rather than say you do this and do that, I want the kids to watch what we do. I want to put them in situations where they understand it’s about what you’re doing for other people, how you’re lifting other people, how you’re creating hope for other people.”

Calipari shared tidbits of his personal faith life during the event, noting for the press that he attends daily Mass most days and adding, “I’ve gotta talk to the bishop because we don’t have a Wednesday morning Mass in Fayetteville.”

He also shared how the examples of faithfulness were on ready display in his home growing up.

“I’m gonna tell you, I am nothing special. I am overrated. I know what I am. I know where I come from,” he said. “My dad was a baggage handler. My mom worked at the high school cafeteria. So what’s happened for me, that I can impact families, is incredible. Like, it’s almost like lightning in a bottle.

“My mom was a pay-it-forward woman. Whatever you have, you’re paying it forward. You’re given something, you get something, you give it. It impacted me.”

Calipari said, like a lot of people, it took time for him to connect those early lessons on

character and generosity with the regular practice of one's Catholic faith.

"Truthfully, the daily communicant came a little bit later in my life and it came because I read a book that (Hall of Fame NFL coach) Vince Lombardi went to Mass every day," he said. "And then I pick up another book on Edward Bennett Williams, who was the owner of the (NFL's Washington) Commanders, he went to Mass every day. And then I heard (NFL winningest coach) Don Shula went to Mass every day. I find out later, (former Alabama coach) Nick Saban went to Mass every day. And I go, maybe I should be going to Mass every day.

"It's just a great way for me to wake up, have a prayer list about everybody else, the people in my life, and meet with the same group. I love going to high schools or grade schools or middle schools where they're having Mass where the kids can see you there, just to let them know this is important."

Calipari's role at Arkansas and his faith will forever be linked to the fact that his decision was heavily influenced by a priest he met while attending last year's Final Four in Phoenix while he was coaching Kentucky.

"We were out west and we had a priest with us, a Catholic priest, he gave Mass one morning in his room," Calipari said in April. "And I said to him, 'Father, I've gotta decide what I'm going to do here. One is Arkansas the other is Kentucky.' And he told to me go for an hour walk and have in your mind that you're the Arkansas coach, and then on the way back, that you're the Kentucky coach. You'll see what moves your heart and what you want to do — and I did that.

"And I'll be honest, when I thought about coming here and building this program and making it something special, it got me excited."

Asked about the story at CHS, Calipari reiterated how the guidance not only helped lead him to Fayetteville, but served as a reminder of how God speaks to a person who takes the time to listen.

"I said, why won't (God) tell me what I should be doing? He doesn't do that," he said. "And I said, 'How about you, Father? Will you tell me what you think?' No, that's not how this works. And so, I went on a walk for an hour; I was the coach at Kentucky and on the way back I was the coach at Arkansas, which made me feel better. It lifted me.

"But, you know, I can remember walking into Mass once, thinking on the way in, 'I'm throwing that kid off the team.' And I went in and prayed a little. I listened to the Scripture and I walked out and I said, I'm gonna be nice. Instead of throwing the kid off, which I should have done because of what he said publicly, which offended me ... after I walked out, I didn't. And guess what? He helped us get to a Final Four so that may have been God telling me something."

Calipari also gave a glimpse into his prayer life. He said he doesn't pray for himself, believing he doesn't deserve it in a life already blessed beyond his merit. Instead, he brings a set list of the people to pray for, including every one of his players, by name.

"They know that I pray for them, every day, 'cause I tell them, and I tell them how I do it through the list. Here's the list. I'm giving their names and they're smiling about it. But I say, 'I pray for you, every day,'" he said. "I let them know that."

He said one of the joys of his career in coaching has been the opportunity to lead people to be

better versions of themselves both on and off the court. He spoke of the charitable work he's been able to do through his position and how he's involved players in acts of kindness and compassion in the community.

"I say to every kid, what's your why? Why are you doing this?" he said. "Is it all ego? What are you trying to accomplish? What do you think you can accomplish if you do the things you're wanting to do? I've been blessed because families have entrusted me with their sons, and it's precious. I don't take it lightly. I try to out care every other coach.

"If you have ever been in my practice, they're held accountable, they're held to a high standard. If you care and you're authentic, you can coach them, you can be hard on them, you can be tough. You can call them in and do all the things you have to do because your job is to get them to change and be on a path in some cases. But my best players have all been good guys. I asked them to pray for me, too."

OCA's Pohlmeier keeps family winning-streak

written by Dwain Hebda |



Like every state, Arkansas has its famous families, those that have risen to the top of their respective fields of endeavor. Mention Walton, Hunt or Stephens and people immediately think of business; mention Rockefeller, Pryor or Huckabee and thoughts turn to politics.

In northwest Arkansas, one family has made its name in several ways. The Pohlmeiers of Fayetteville are known for their longstanding contributions to Catholic education and doctrine, with educators, administrators, deacons and even a bishop on the family tree. And, of late, the family is also known for winning — a lot — a tradition carried on by Clare Pohlmeier, one of the top runners in the state.

Pohlmeier, a junior at Ozark Catholic Academy, has been a runner to watch in Class 1A since she was a freshman, both on the track and over the cross-country course. As a ninth grader, she placed second in the 1A state cross country meet, a feat she repeated last season as the girls team placed third overall in both years.

In track, her inaugural state meet saw her come home with two silvers — 1600 meters and 3200 meters — and a bronze in the 4×800 relay as the Griffins were second in team scoring. Last spring, however, OCA turned the tide and laid waste to the field, winning the 1A girls' track title led by their super sophomore. Pohlmeier won at 3200 meters and was second at 800 meters, 1600 meters and the 4×800 meter relay.

Pohlmeier said her focus in off-season training has been on consistency, keeping the right intensity and driving to improve. She's also honed the mental aspect to match her physical abilities.

"It's really hard to stay positive with running," she said. "A big thing is, when it comes to running, your body can go further, but it's your mind telling you to stop because it's too painful. It's really hard to get over that hurdle of telling your body that you can do it when your mind says you can't."

When asked for her techniques for training the mind in such a grueling sport, Pohlmeier said she relies on her Catholic faith.

"Honestly, I like to pray a lot while I run," she said. "I'll be running, and if I start to have those thoughts of, like, you can't do it, I'll be like, no, God says I can, so I'll just keep going. It makes it easier for me to push myself during practices."

Pohlmeier's other secret weapon has been the presence of her older brother, Isaac Pohlmeier, an OCA senior. One of the most decorated high school runners in Arkansas over the past three seasons, Isaac brought home eight golds over the past two years at state track to go with state championship cross-country titles each of the last two years. OCA's boys, however, were edged out in 2024's team scoring, spoiling a quest for back-to-back titles and giving Clare a measure of bragging rights.

"There's a lot of, like, little sibling competitions. You want to be better than the other," she said. "During the season, we'll always be joking with each other as to who's better or whatever. But then, when it comes down to the actual important meets, we're always cheering each other on and being there for each other."

She chuckled, then added, "It's definitely a complicated relationship."

What isn't complicated is the challenge that lies before the squad in the new year. Due to the Griffins' dominance, the school was reclassified 2A, pitting them against larger schools. Ever the competitor, the unflappable Pohlmeier doesn't shy away when handicapping her squad's chances to hang with the tougher competition.

"I think it's going to be a really big mental game this season," she said. "We all need to be on the same page if we want to win. We're all going to have to work individually and push ourselves as hard as we can, but also push as a team and help other people be motivated to work hard. That's really it, same as always."

State champ Mount golf team is looking to repeat 2023 feat

written by Dwain Hebda |



The Mount St. Mary Academy golf team has had a productive and eventful summer following its dramatic second-day charge that landed the Belles top honors in 6A by just two strokes.

Since then, players report having worked harder on all aspects of their game and in the weight room, strengthening team bonds to boot.

"Winning state last year really gave us a confidence boost," said junior Ana Bella Gutierrez, who attends Christ the King Church in Little Rock. "It made us go into this season much more

assertive and sure of ourselves, knowing that we can win. The girls are more comfortable around each other and becoming more of a family, trusting in each other.”

The team has had to adjust to more than having a target on its back as state champs, welcoming a new head coach, Laura Freville, who replaces Cody Griffin. A longtime golfer herself, Freville has never coached a squad at any level but said she was immediately comfortable in the role, having watched her daughter, Chloe, and other members of the team grow up through junior golf.

“Oh, I just love being with the girls,” she said. “That was honestly the hardest part because most of the girls are friends of Chloe’s, so we’re always together, and I’m like, oh my gosh, I’m a coach now. I have to back off and be a coach and not a mom.”

Whatever the connection, it’s working, as the team has looked strong in early tournaments this season. The team topped the field at the Bill Agler High School Invitational in style Sept. 9-10, with Chloe Freville, York and Gutierrez finishing in order, respectively, atop the leaderboard.

York, Gutierrez and Chloe Freville will be looked to for leadership this year, and all three said they were up to the task, having sharpened various parts of their game in the off-season. York said that in addition to playing regularly over the summer, she spent more time in the weight room to improve her lengths off the tee and endurance late in rounds.

“My game has improved immensely,” said York, a sophomore who is also a member of Christ the King Church. “In the off-season, I wanted to focus on strength training to become faster, stronger and just ultimately a better player. I played so many tourneys over the summer I was really grooved in and I felt confident in what I was doing.”

Meanwhile, Chloe Freville, a junior and member of Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock, concentrated on the mental game, work which has helped her move past bad shots and concentrate on the next stroke.

“I’ve been going to a sports psychologist, and he has helped me a lot on the mental game,” she said. “It helped me improve playing-wise and mentally as well. If I have a bad shot, I just forget about it, I put it out of my mind. I think, ‘Chloe you’ve got it; it’s just one hole, one shot, just do better on the next shot.’”

All three athletes said the skill level on the 2024 squad is considerable, and with the additional practice and competitive seasoning, confidence is running high for a repeat title.

“I think we got a really big boost of confidence last year, because winning state is pretty big,” Chloe said. “I definitely think we have some competition but overall I think we have a really good chance at winning state.”

Siblings feel love, support at raucous

Olympic send-off

written by OSV News |



Paul Whittaker expects to feel the stress when he watches his daughters, Juliette and Isabella Whittaker, run during this summer's Olympic Games.

"I almost passed out at the trials," said Paul, a former Georgetown University runner who is now the indoor track-and-field coach at Mount de Sales Academy. "Literally, I got up and was light-headed. We were screaming so much. 'Wow, they just made it to the Olympic team.' Everybody else was running to congratulate them and I just had to sit down."

Juliette and Isabella Whittaker, a pair of Mount de Sales alums, received a raucous send-off rally in front of about 250 people at the all-girls high school in the Baltimore suburb of Catonsville July 18 as they prepared to fly to Paris July 24. Track-and-field events are scheduled to begin Aug. 1.

Juliette Whittaker, a 2022 Mount de Sales graduate and Stanford University student-athlete, is the reigning NCAA Champion in the women's 800-meter run. She secured her spot in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games with a third-place finish (1 minute, 58.45 seconds) at the U.S. Olympic trials June 21-30 in Eugene, Oregon.

Razorback runner Isabella Whittaker, who graduated from Mount de Sales in 2020 and the University of Pennsylvania this spring, qualified for the relay pool of the 4×400 relay team for Paris, finishing sixth in her 400-meter leg (50.68) at the U.S. Olympic trials.

"It's very nice to feel so much love and support," Isabel said about the reception at the school.

“It’s coming from all the people we’ve met through the years. It’s coming from swimming friends we met, teammates and classmates, and current track runners. It feels good,” she told the Catholic Review, the news outlet of the Baltimore Archdiocese.

Juliette, who will be a junior next fall, becomes the first current Stanford track-and-field athlete to make a U.S. team since Erica McLain in the triple jump in 2008, her senior season.

She ran past the pack and finished third in the final in 1:58.45, a Stanford record. Whittaker’s time was the 11th-fastest all-time performance by a collegian and Whittaker became the sixth-fastest performer.

In 2021, Juliette was a rising senior at Mount de Sales when she competed at the U.S. Olympic trials in Eugene. She recorded the 10th-fastest time in the 800-meter run semifinals, the first woman to miss the cutoff for the final race.

“I think growing up in the sport I feel like we were always saying ‘I want to go to the Olympics.’ Obviously, Bella and I were always saying that,” said Juliette, who lives with her family in Laurel and attends St. Joseph Church in Odenton. “For a while, it was more so in the swimming world and we wanted to become Olympic swimmers. It wasn’t until more recently that the goals were in the track world. I feel like we always kind of set it, but it never sunk in that we could do it together at the same time.”

Isabella graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 2024. Last season, Whittaker earned first-team All-America honors with a fifth-place finish in the 400 at the NCAA outdoor track and field championships.

She followed that up by finishing sixth in the 400 at the U.S. Olympic Trials and earning a spot on Team USA’s women’s 4×400 and mixed 4×400 relay squads.

Isabella graduated from Penn holding four individual records and as a part of four record-setting relay teams. She made history this past season when she broke Ivy League indoor and outdoor 400 marks originally set in 1990.

In addition, Isabella was a co-recipient of the university’s prestigious Association of Alumnae Fathers’ Trophy.

Isabella has one year remaining of athletic eligibility and will compete next season for the University of Arkansas Razorbacks, one of the premier programs in the nation.

Mount de Sales Athletic Director Eric Dummann knew that both Juliette and Isabella were going to go far in their track careers. Therefore, he is not surprised they are competing in the Olympics.

“The term I keep using is that they are generational athletes,” Dummann said. “They are not just all-stars or girls you see here and there making all-state. They are truly generational talents.”

Dominican Sister Mary Raymond Thye, principal of Mount de Sales, made Juliette and Isabella rosaries to take with them to Paris. The rosaries have an anchor insignia that represents the school mascot, the Sailors.

“This is really something historic for something like this at Mount de Sales,” Sister Mary Raymond said.

The Whittaker sisters live in Laurel and are parishioners of St. Joseph in Odenton.