

They may be short on sneakers, but New Haven's St. Martin de Porres' field hockey team has loftier goals

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NEW HAVEN — There may be broken glass on the sidewalk and boarded-up windows of the abandoned church overlooking the field, but the middle school girls of St. Martin de Porres Academy are ready for a rousing hour of field hockey practice.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, after their regular classes, the girls go outside, joined by their volunteer coach, Cathy Elrick of North Branford, and grab their sticks and balls, shinguards and bottles of water and prepare to play.

So what if the field is only a fraction of the size that it should be for a regulation game? And that there's no net, and that some of the girls don't have sneakers? These are children who are accustomed to working around such problems.

And Elrick, who managed to talk plenty of donors into helping the school acquire equipment as well as some cool field-hockey uniforms (tan skirts and navy blue T-shirts), has no hesitation about taking off her own sneakers and donating them to a player who needs decent shoes so she can run down the field in pursuit of a ball.

In fact, it's not uncommon to find Elrick herself in her stocking feet coaching and directing from the sidelines, as she leads the players in drills and plays.

Field hockey usually isn't a middle school sport, and it certainly is not a game that's traditionally played in inner-city schools, but St. Martin de Porres isn't just any middle school in the inner city

The school, which began three years ago, is an independent faith-based middle

school that provides tuition-free, extended-day education for girls and boys of all races and religions who are from low-income families in the New Haven area. Kids attend 11 months a year, for 10 hours a day, with extra-curricular activities such as art and sports being offered in the afternoons.

“Our goal is to help our kids succeed,” says Principal Kelly O’Leary.

“We want to introduce them to the things that will help them get scholarships, and field hockey players do get scholarships. So while at first we weren’t sure if they would like it because it’s not an easy game and they have no context for it, they really did take to it immediately. We have 19 girls on the team, and they are all so excited about it.”

Excitement might not begin to describe the determination with which the girls of St. Martin’s have embraced the sport. They are passionate about the game, says Elrick with a laugh.

“This summer, I offered to help them practice at a field in West Haven,” she says. “It was over 90 degrees, and I was ready to just keel over, but they were running up and down the field, insisting I teach them more and more.”

Right now, there are 61 students in fifth through eighth grade. And the school has graduated 31 students, many of whom are on scholarships at private schools, such as Notre Dame, Hopkins and Mercy.

All students are encouraged to think daily about colleges they want to attend. Indeed, talk of college is so ubiquitous that the classes are referred to, not by the year they will leave St. Martin de Porres, but by the year in which they will graduate from college. The class years now range from 2019 to 2022.

But none of that is what matters today, when the sun is shining, and there are balls that need to be dribbled across the field by girls wielding sticks.

Namandje Wali, II, of New Haven, says she loves the sport because of the teamwork. “When you’re with a team, you share the victory,” she says. “I think it helps you learn not to be selfish. Even when we lose, I can see that we played good. We’re improving.”

Madiah Gant, 13, of New Haven, is the only one of the 19 girls on the team to have played a team sport previously. Her sister, Maria, who is two years older, is now playing field hockey for Mercy High School after learning to play at St. Martin de Porres.

“She and I both love to play this game,” says Madiah. “I like the uniforms. And I like how the ball flies. It was a little bit hard at first, learning the rules, especially the rules that you can’t kick the ball. And that you can’t lift your stick up. But I love to play. I want to go to Mercy or Hopkins and I’ll definitely play there.”

Elrick says that the games St. Martin plays are mostly informal so far, with the referees helping the players learn the game. Still, they’re pleased to have recently won against Amistad Academy, also of New Haven.

But perhaps even more rewarding than the wins, she says, is the spirit with which her players embrace the game. Recently, she took the team on a field trip to watch Maria Gant play for Mercy against Hamden High School. George Longyear, from Yale, an official who has been an umpire for field hockey for nearly 10 years on both the high school and collegiate level, sent an e-mail to O’Leary after the game.

It read, in part, “Yesterday I had a very awesome experience courtesy of students from St Martin de Porres Academy. It is not that often that we as officials interact with the spectators, but in the case of your students, I felt compelled to greet them.

Their well-mannered, positive cheering, was something I have not witnessed before in a regular season high school game. I was so taken back, that your school would think to not only attend a game of a former student, but to come prepared with signs and choreographed cheers. My applause to you, your staff and the students for doing this. Not only did they encourage the players from Mercy, but also supported the game. Thanks for the amazing reminder that sports is not all about winning, but all about the players!!”