Athletics: Embracing the Gift of Competition

by J.D. Childs, President

Sport is a very rich source of values and virtues that help us to become better people. Like the athlete during training, practicing sport helps us to give our best, to discover our limits without fear, and to struggle daily to improve.

Pope Francis

Bishop O’Dowd High School is lauded for many things, among them its strong academic programs, its competitive sports teams, and its diverse student body. But O’Dowd’s most distinctive quality is defined by its Catholic values, shared through the prism of charism. Our students see their learning—both in and out of the classroom—as a means to create a more just, joyful, and sustainable world. As they grow and develop, they offer their gifts in service to the common good.

Our athletic excellence is no exception; in fact, sports are a key medium through which we practice our charism. Athletics engage the mind and the heart, as well as the body. They enable students to learn such life skills as emotional intelligence, friendship, trust, respect, and joy. They offer opportunities for self-exploration, self-discipline, and facing and overcoming challenges. And they allow students to push themselves toward excellence. Athletics offers individual development and differentiation that contribute to the collective good – of the team, the sport, and O’Dowd.

Athletics and Community Building

Playing on a team at O’Dowd brings together students of different backgrounds into a defined athletic culture and set of expectations around hard work and pride. Camaraderie is created among teammates who bond around personal and team goals. In this context, students discover a sense of team belonging that disposes them to confidence and belonging within the larger O’Dowd community. Dragons compete to win, and their games and matches provide important opportunities for the entire extended community – parents, alumni, and alumni families – to come to campus to celebrate and cheer, building O’Dowd pride and spirit.
Teaching Valuable Life Skills

Team membership and competition build translatable skills. **Such learned skills as confidence, teamwork, collaboration, problem-solving, resilience, goal-setting, commitment, and time management contribute to O’Dowd students’ future success.**

Several recently published papers affirm the positive effects of engagement in athletics. According to the Datalys Center for Sports Injury Research and Prevention, “Youth sports participation positively impacts many aspects of academic performance and achievement including grade point average, standardized test scores, graduation, attendance, behavior in and out of the classroom, and future educational achievement.”

As we’ve learned from our alumni, Dragon physical education and sports participation lead to a lifetime commitment to fitness and wellness, as well as lifelong friendships.

A Commitment to Excellence

Recognizing these factors, O’Dowd’s sports programs are designed to support our student athletes both on and off the field. O’Dowd offers 16 sports, with a total of 57 competitive Dragon teams at the freshman, junior varsity, and varsity levels. Over 700 Dragons are members of the school’s sports teams each year.

**Our school has been consistently ranked in the top ten of nearly 175 North Coast Section schools for academic and athletic achievement.** In 2016, O’Dowd was ranked first among those schools and was awarded the NCS Elmer Brown Award for academic and athletic excellence. In 2019, O’Dowd was touted as having the top athletic program among independent schools in northern California, based on its overall competitive results from the 18-19 school year.

Each year, more than 20 O’Dowd graduates go on to play college sports. Our counseling staff partners with the athletics department to provide college recruiting assistance, aligning athletic and academic aspirations. O’Dowd alumni have consistently been members of the NFL, NBA, and MLB, playing professional sports in the United States and abroad, and even competing in the Olympics. Some Dragon alumni move into coaching positions or other support roles affiliated with school and professional athletics.
Key to our athletic excellence is the O'Dowd coaching staff. Coaches are among the most powerful mentors for students, playing a significant formative role in their lives. They promote passion, hard work, discipline, and excellence in the sport. Cultivating a winning culture at O'Dowd, Dragon coaches emphasize winning graciously and losing with humility, but above all - competing ferociously.

Coaches are supported in their roles through our strength and conditioning program that is designed to develop personal athleticism through mobility training drills, posture analysis, movement patterns, strength training, and speed and power progressions. Students develop individualized training programs, differentiated by gender, sport, and body type, utilizing digital technology, in partnership with strength and conditioning professionals at O'Dowd.

“I began going to the weight room the first week of my freshman year and from then on I practically lived there. I left a lot of hard work and determination in that small weight room, and my coaching at O'Dowd is what helped me to become a USA Rugby player.”

Shariyf Mayer ’18

O'Dowd's award-winning sports medicine team supports all students across campus. This team handles more than 5,300 student visits per year, serving elite-caliber athletes, young developing athletes, and any other students with campus-related injuries. A certified athletic trainer is present at every O'Dowd home varsity game and travels with our teams as needed to provide sports medicine support and immediately attend to sideline emergencies.

Challenged by Lack of Space

The success and popularity of our athletics programs, however, have long surpassed O'Dowd’s current facilities. With over 60 percent of our students participating, athletics is the largest co-curricular program on campus — nearly two dozen men’s and women’s teams currently compete for gym time for both competition and practice, including baseball, basketball, lacrosse, softball, soccer and volleyball.

Our current large gym seats a maximum of 400 spectators; leg room is cramped and pillars block visibility from many seats. Because of our limited facilities, we have often been turned down for hosting playoff games, limiting our home-court advantage. Our small strength and conditioning facility means that teams either lose gym and weight room time, or that students’ days are lengthened in order to accommodate all. Furthermore, with our current configuration, it’s difficult to coordinate athlete rehabilitation and training.
“To match the elite basketball program that’s been developing over many years at O’Dowd, a bigger gym would bring more people to the games to support our team and help us pursue another state championship.”

Caden Wooster ’22

The O’Dowd Center: A Winning, Integrated Solution

In order to remain at the top of their game, schools must grow and adapt to meet the needs of new generations. To that end, we envision a new facility in which we can expand the excellence and accessibility of our fitness and athletic programs.

The O’Dowd Center will be a modern space to optimize care for our students and promote their performance excellence. Augmenting our existing gyms, its new gymnasium will allow multiple teams to practice simultaneously; it will feature a full-size competition court that will triple our current seating capacity, enabling us to host many more post-season competitions. And it will greatly enhance the fan experience, with better sightlines in the gym and viewing of field sports from the building’s first- and second-floor outdoor terraces.

The Center’s innovative design will streamline the athlete and coach experience. Teams will be able to work out together in the athletic performance lab. The multi-purpose instructional space will be used for classes, chalk talks, film study, team activities, presentations, and meetings.

A Win for Students

The O’Dowd Center will upgrade our campus and the student experience in countless ways. The new gymnasium and adjacent athletic performance lab will improve our overall game immeasurably. And we know from research and experience that the benefits students reap in athletics positively impact their academic and other co-curricular commitments as well.

By providing these new facilities, we are honoring the tradition of Dragon success through the decades. We are demonstrating our heartfelt commitment to excellence and innovation. Building the new O’Dowd Center will advance our Catholic mission for generations to come.