

## **Bishop Baker Blesses Pope John Paul II Catholic High School's New Baseball Field**

On March 1, Bishop Robert Baker, accompanied by the Fr. Patrick J. Murphy Assembly 2420 Knights of Columbus from St. John's Catholic Church and Fr. Vincent Bresowar from Holy Spirit Catholic Church, blessed the new baseball field at Pope John Paul II Catholic High School, the school's first outdoor sports facility.

Principal Vincent Aquila opened the dedication ceremony. "This is a very special, historic, significant day," Aquila said, addressing the large crowd of JPPII athletes, students, parents, alumni, and supporters. "It's an honor to be here. You're a blessing to us to be here today."

JPPII played their first home game against John Carroll Catholic High School from Birmingham. "We're meeting together Catholic against Catholic today. May the better team win," Bishop Baker said in the blessing ceremony preceding the games. Bishop Baker then spoke at length to the teams and the fans, emphasizing the importance of companionship and advising the schools to "continue to develop [their] friendly rivalry," because, he stressed, "That is the point of sports: friendly and affable relations."

Fr. Bresowar read from 1 Corinthians 9:24-27: "Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we have an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified."

Bishop Baker went on to remind everyone that through our words and actions, we can be models of Jesus Christ so that others will come to know Him. "As St. Paul says, you're working for an imperishable victory," he told the teams.

The Falcons' parents and players certainly worked in a spirit of sacrifice, giving up their time, labor, and money to finish building the field. "This was started and driven by parents with their hard work – not only monetary contributions, but countless hours in sweat equity," Falcons coach Wes Robertson said. Stephen Kusek, father of left fielder Bryan Kusek '14, led the effort and was recognized for his work at the opening ceremony.

The cost of the field to date has been about \$140,000, the vast majority of which was contributed directly from parents. "This was all funded by donations. The city did not pay for a single thing, so this is all parents' donations, and we thank all the parents and all the donors who did that, and all the people who came out to work," Bryan Kusek said.

But even with all of their monetary gifts, the field would never have been finished were it not for the volunteer work of the coaches, the parents, and the players, who got their own hands dirty shoveling dirt and gravel, and helping to maintain the fledgling field in order to effectively cut out the costs of hiring professional contractors for every aspect of the job.

“It felt like we weren’t going to finish it while I was at school, but then...[when it got] closer and closer to being done, it got pretty exciting and you were wanting to go out and work on it every day,” third baseman Joe Rivenburgh ’15 said.

“It took a lot of hours, man hours...but it had to get done, and now all that work has paid off and we’re able to play on it this year,” Bryan Kusek said. “It’s been a long time coming.”

The players certainly felt that spirit of companionship that Bishop Baker spoke about during the ceremony, several of them claiming that the experience has strengthened their relationships with one another. “Working on it as a team I feel brought us a lot closer together,” Rivenburgh said. “‘Cause normally we’d have infield practice on our makeshift infield, and the outfielders would be like a half mile away doing outfield work, so we never really got a good team bonding experience.”

The team has overseen the creation of the field through three phases: erecting the batting cages, making the infield, and preparing the outfield and building the dugouts. “Every phase has seemed unreal from the standpoint of having zero facilities,” Coach Robertson said. But although the field is playable, the team will still spend the next couple of years fundraising for amenities such as a scoreboard, bleachers, and covering the open-air batting cages.

“The guys deserve this, with us having less than most. But I have never heard them complain. They have never used it as an excuse,” Robertson said. “Baseball alumni, parents, players – everyone deserves it.”

Communal support has also been a key to sustaining the Falcons’ morale and determination to see the field through the construction. Not only have parents and local companies donated money, but students have also come out to see them, even at some of the more far-flung games.

“Last year, they had strong student support everywhere they played, which says a lot about the team and student support,” Robertson said. “They would drive 45 minutes to sit in the cold, which is awesome.” Robertson, as well as the rest of the team, hopes that that support will only continue to grow now that students can simply walk out of school and head to the baseball field for a home game.

Last year was a year of triumphal firsts for the team: their first winning record and their first playoff appearance at the state level. The team’s goal this year is to make it further into the playoffs, and many members have hopes of going to state.

Pope John Paul II went on to win 6-1 over John Carroll.