

Department of Athletics

August 2019

Annual Letter to Middlesex Parents on Supporting their Child's Athletic Experience

Dear Middlesex parents,

We write to ask your support in ensuring that our children have positive athletic experiences, and to consider modeling the best way that parents can support that goal – through our own behavior as spectators, supporters, and encouragers. Given our emotional investment in our children, which can be influenced by the conflicting values on display at professional sporting events, we sometimes overstep the boundaries of our children's experience and feel the need to take part in it for ourselves. Stepping back, we can all see that for our children to get what we truly want for them in the big picture – resiliency, determination, a growth mindset, problem-solving skills, camaraderie, leadership, grace under pressure, poise, confidence, courage – we need to allow them to do the work of learning and growing, while understanding that some of life's most important lessons come through adversity. Athletic practice and competition are great sources of experiential learning and resiliency training, but to learn from the experience a child has to have the experience and own the experience. As parents, all we can do is relentlessly support and encourage our kids.

This year we will be partnering, once again, with the Positive Coaching Alliance to bring a shared vocabulary and guiding philosophies and practices to our roles as athletes, coaches, and parents. We will host two PCA workshops this year with a focus on the student-athletes and the coaches that will broaden the impact of the PCA's positive culture building in athletics. If you are interested, please take a look at their website and the excellent resources for parents found at: <http://www.positivecoach.org/the-power-of-positive/>.

In the interim, here are some suggestions and expectations for making the sidelines a positive place:

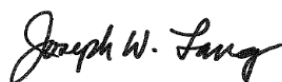
- 1) ***Cheer for, not against*** -- for Middlesex, not against other kids. Our kids often send all-school emails with the phrase, "Keep it classy, Middlesex," and that's the ground we want to be ours. Please honor where we are asked to stand, as spectators; please lead the league in respect, courtesy and sportsmanship, both at home and away contests. Support positive sideline culture, as it makes being a spectator and a parent a lot more fun, and we want to be able to enjoy our children's games amongst friends. Positive parent support and sideline behavior makes a huge difference to the success of our program and our students' experience.
- 2) As the adults in this educational setting, we actually have a responsibility to all of the students competing, not just to Middlesex teams. **In the Independent School League Essential Understandings, ISL schools have agreed to the following principle: "Every school in the league should field teams with confidence that every coach is as concerned with the health and safety of opposing players as with his or her own."** At Middlesex, we extend that idea to our roles as spectators and assume responsibility for making sure that our competitors experience us as fair, intense, positive fans and athletes.
- 3) **Please support the officials.** Referees are human and make mistakes. In the heat of a game, we want the refs to be kindly disposed towards our kids, and our being supportive and respectful on the sideline can only help. We want the refs to enjoy seeing Middlesex kids on the field/rink/court and be glad to work at our games.
- 4) **The Independent School League in which we compete is deep and very competitive.** Please remember that your child is no longer competing just in his or her age group, that the athletic talent in the ISL is deep, and that *the age of competitors runs from 12 to 19 years of age*. Students who have been stars at their own age-level often find a different experience in high school, particularly early on, and everyone needs to

remember the “small fish in the big pond” situation that all students find themselves in as they begin their athletic careers at Middlesex. While it might be natural to be disappointed at not making a varsity team, it is usually the result of coming up against older, bigger, stronger students who have been putting in the time to improve for years. It can be very hard to manage expectations, so please help your student understand context as he or she adjusts.

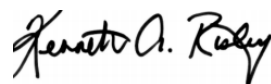
- 5) **Help your child “own” the experience and communicate with coaches him/herself.** Competitive athletics provides some of the best experiential education opportunities available for our students, and by the time a student reaches ninth grade it is time to learn to communicate questions and concerns directly. As needed, speak with your child about his/her communication with his/her coach, recognizing both that our coaches are teachers -- their work in athletics is an extension of their work in the classroom -- and our children are teenagers who may respond to our earnest questions with a quick, “I don’t know” or, “the coach doesn’t like me”, without wanting to get into more complicated discussions. Coaches see students’ everyday play and effort and assess skills and playing time on many factors not seen or experienced by parents. When expectations aren’t met, parents often question children – why aren’t you playing more? What did you do wrong? Often children know answers but don’t share them for fear of disappointing parents; maybe the effort in practice is far less than competition, or maybe they have finally reached a team where everyone is really good, and he/she is no longer the star. Sometimes it is simply that the student is now playing at a higher, more intense level and needs time to adjust and grow. *Help your child become an able and mature communicator -- a most important life skill -- and let him or her do the work of navigating the challenges and handling the relationships with coaches and teammates.* The skills of self-advocacy, processing feedback, managing disappointment, and exercising resiliency and grit are critical skills for young people to learn.
- 6) **Please model respectful behavior towards our coaches.** Please be mindful that athletics is only one part of our students’ lives and that our teacher-coaches’ schedules are also full of other events and commitments. Occasional team events are held at the coaches’ discretion and designed to fit within the dynamic and the time demands placed on students and faculty by the Middlesex schedule. *We do not expect Middlesex coaches to debrief or meet with parents after games, when the coaches’ attention is focused on debriefing the experience with students, nor do we expect coaches to attend after-game events.* Middlesex coaches are professional educators who see athletics in a learning context, as fantastic co-curricular opportunities to teach values and nurture character, and to revel in physical activity, competition, and teamwork. Our coaches want to support our students’ personal growth both in the short and in the long-terms. This focus takes most of their energy, as does building positive team culture, and they need the space to do this meaningful work. Please resist the urge to give explicit direction and coaching to the players, which differs from just encouragement, from the sideline as this will confuse and inhibit your child’s performance and could undermine the game plan and instructions implemented by the coaches. Please let the coaches work with the athletes to take care of the double-goals of winning and reaping the life lessons of character and sportsmanship. Your role as a Middlesex parent is to concentrate on that second goal, your child’s character development, while letting the athletes and coaches focus on the goal of winning on the scoreboard.

If there is a pressing need for you as a parent to communicate with a coach on an issue that cannot be resolved directly between coach and student, please discuss the situation with your child’s advisor. If it cannot be resolved through that conversation, please email the coach to find a time for a conversation. If there remains a serious unresolved problem, please email or call either our Dean of Athletics Joe Lang, at jlange@mxschool.edu, (978) 318-1028, or Director of Athletics Ken Risley at krisley@mxschool.edu, (978) 371-6560.

We look forward to a great year for Middlesex athletics, and we thank you for your enthusiasm and support.



Joe Lang
Dean of Athletics



Ken Risley
Director of Athletics