



MONSIGNOR DONOVAN HIGH SCHOOL

KICKING OFF A NEW FOOTBALL TRADITION

In late May head coach Kurt Page addresses the Monsignor Donovan team prior to the first football scrimmage in its history against Augusta Prep.

ATHENS—The Rams faced third down. It was an early test for the young team. Their first offensive play from the line of scrimmage had ended in a 12-yard loss. The offensive line this time pushed forward and running back Jeremiah Jordan sprinted to the right sideline. He broke free of pursuing players to scramble 67 yards to the end zone.

It took a little more than two minutes to put six points on the scoreboard.

The inaugural football season of the Rams of Monsignor Donovan High School was underway, as the 300 or so students, parents and supporters roared. Four quarters later, the team and its supporters celebrated the first victory, 44-26. (The team record improved to 2-0 after defeating Holy Spirit Preparatory School, Atlanta.)

“Now that we have a football team, we are kind of like all the other public schools, so we can get revved up on Fridays, we look forward to Fridays more now,

and it really brings us all together,” said Jacob Price.

He and another senior, Freddy Balentine, cheered from the bleachers. The two seniors came to the game shirtless and showed their school spirit by painting their bodies blue.

“We’re going to be here painted up every game,” said Price.

One of the smallest independent Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Atlanta, the school suited up a football team this fall for the first time. Some of the players in shoulder pads had just learned a three-point stance while some previously played at large public high schools. By contrast, the War Eagles of Atlanta’s Marist School have played 100 seasons of football.

Someone bring the ball

“We didn’t have a football on campus,” said the new coach, Kurt Page, a former Vanderbilt quarterback, hired in January to get the program off the ground. He ran spring training with



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17 players. The team grew to two-dozen by the kickoff at East Athens Community Park for the game against the Nathanael Greene Patriots. “The canvas was blank. We had a great opportunity to develop fundamentals. These guys have been fun to coach.”

Players said they wanted to play on the first team for “brotherhood,” the competition and love of the game.

Braxton Haley, wide receiver, predicted a winning season.

“I have a passion for football. At the end of the season, I want to look back and say I had fun, I have no regrets and I hope the brotherhood gets stronger,” he said.

J.D. Daniels, a wide receiver with the nickname “The Tractor,” said opponents will have to respect the Rams. Others may think they are a pushover team, but there’s a lot of talent, he

said. The players and the school community have embraced the program, he said. “The whole school seems like it’s playing.”

School leaders and parents believe the new program will draw the school community together, in addition to attracting students and parents looking both for strong academics and the character building learned in athletic competition.

“It’s rounded out this feeling that maybe we were somehow lacking in comparison to other schools in the area,” said David Bell, a history and English teacher. He also coaches and is a faculty advisor outside of the classroom. “If you look around Athens, Georgia, being a football mecca, you don’t see many schools that don’t have football programs. So, now that we’ve gotten there, started it, we’ve got high hopes this will develop into something meaningful for us.”

Indeed, the civic religion that is high school football shows its popularity. More students in Georgia are pulling on shoulder

pads. Participation in the sport has increased by nearly 500 students in four years. According to the National Federation of State High School Associations, the number of football players was 32,726 in 2011-2012.

Friday nights draw students

Monsignor Donovan High School opened in 2002. Football had been part of its initial strategic plan but adding the sport was delayed. School leaders last year decided to pursue it. They wanted to attract students, instead of seeing them walk out the door because of a lack of athletic opportunity.

Charles Auslander, the school board president, said the team is a step toward building the school’s student body.

“We lost students that would go to other schools because they wanted that experience. Both girls and boys would go to other schools because they wanted to have that high school experience that some people associate with football. We wanted people to be



Monsignor Donovan junior wide receiver Michael Ohana outruns defensive back Dalton Shellnut for a 35-yard catch and the team's second first-quarter touchdown. Monsignor Donovan recorded its first victory by defeating Nathanael Greene Academy 44-26.

able to have the opportunity to play the sports they wanted to play and football did bring that to us," Auslander said.

Now, the school has a long-term plan to expand the program. After hiring a coach, converting a classroom into a locker room, and fielding a team, the attention will turn to erecting a football field on campus. In addition, there is the new cheerleading squad and a pep band.

Both the school and its parents are building new traditions.

For the first game on Friday, Aug. 23, the school expanded its lunch period to an hour, turning it into a cookout and a pep rally.

Senior Balentine said, "It's pumped us up, especially after the school bell, when everybody is getting ready to go to their lockers and home. We just start celebrating, just start getting

pumped up for the game."

At the community park, a tent covered tables heavy with chips, dip and brownies. Parents sat in the shade for relief in the humid 90 degrees.

Mandy Dellinger said she's seen the program in its infancy knit together parents and students alike. "Everyone's really excited. They are all pulling together. The parents are getting together and having a tailgate and we are all sending stuff in for the kids and the groups are getting closer together," she said.

Her son, Dylan, weighing in at 240 lbs., is in the trenches, playing on the offensive and defensive line. People would often ask him where he played football, she said, so he is excited to try out the sport. The junior usually played soccer.

She sees how the team has

jelled. "They have a group where they study together before they have practice and it's just bringing them close together," she said.

Sue Shaffer's daughter is a cheerleader. The cheerleading squad is also new this year, to rouse the crowds. "We were ecstatic," she said when the school announced it was starting the new programs. "Everybody seems to be pulling together and just really hyped up about it," she said.

Local athletes transfer

Principal Patrick Yuran said the sport is a way to round out the students' experience and shape them into leaders. "I hope we are able to build life skills for

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'My team is like family to me. Playing football basically made me change my life, because I always wanted to play football but I never got the chance to play football when I was younger. This is my first season playing competitive football.'

Chris Cayard, #35, Defensive end and running back



'I think a lot of people are going to think we are just going to be a pushover team, but we're a lot better than any other first-year team.'

J.D. Daniels, #33, Wide receiver and linebacker

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the young men and women,” he said. The community support was clear from the first spring training. “Gobs of people” came to watch, he said.

The football program is also adding to the student body, a valuable draw for the small school with 133 students. Close to half of the male population at the school is on the football team.

Auslander graduated in 1990 from Atlanta’s Marist School, and he envisions Monsignor Donovan High School emulating his alma mater’s reputation on the playing field, in the classroom and in the chapel.

“Really, it is their academics and their Catholic identity that most parents send their kids for,” he said about Marist. “We want to be the top academic school, we want to provide that Catholic community, and just have that additional piece, that complementary piece, which is athletics. We want to excel at everything.”

And faculty member Bell said he’s noticed the new students in the school.

“A little bit of a bump is very, very welcome,” he said.

Larry Childs is one of those new students. He is a junior and lines up as the center and nose tackle. He played at the local public school, Clarke Central, with its top tier football program, but transferred to Monsignor Donovan, drawn to the academics and the opportunity.



Jack Murray, standing right, area director for Fellowship of Christian Athletes, leads the Monsignor Donovan Rams in a prayer just before their season opener against Nathanael Greene Academy of Siloam.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

“It was a perfect fit. He could get the academics that he wanted but also the football that he was wanting, because he is hoping to play at the next level,” said his father, Keith Childs.

“The fans really like it, the kids really like it. It also brings in students, like my son and three and

four others that transferred with him, that football is important because they will use it to get to the next level, to help them with their education,” said Childs, who is a leader in youth football in the community.

As for the academics, Childs said, “It’s night and day. He

comes home and he is doing three times more work than he was at the other school for the same classes. He’s loving every minute of it.”

Along the sidelines of the first game, coach Page paced and jogged up and down the sideline, cajoling his team. His buzz cut

was wet with sweat, along with his soaked T-shirt. He called his team “wily veterans” who looked forward to the season.

He told the players “play and have fun, lift each other up, and have a really, really good time, enjoying the atmosphere and the Friday night lights.”



‘There’s nothing like being on the first team, especially if you are successful, and that’s what we are striving for.’

Lee Brackman, #12
Quarterback and linebacker



The team runs through the banner, held by cheerleaders, less than a minute before kickoff of the school’s inaugural regular season football game. The banner read “RAM NATION It’s a way of life.”

PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER