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**ANNOUNCING THE YEAR'S
TOP HIGH SCHOOL
ATHLETIC PROGRAMS**



2013 PROGRAM OF EXCELLENCE HONOREE University School of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis.



Photos Courtesy University School of Milwaukee

University School of Milwaukee gets a great number of its students involved in athletics, boasting an 83 percent participation rate.

Milwaukee School Sets High Marks for Academic, Athletic Excellence

By Kevin Hoffman, Managing Editor

Rick Johns managed to win just one game during his first year as a football coach at a small school in eastern Minnesota. It's not the type of season any competitive coach hopes for, but that brutal initiation into high school athletics led to some reassuring advice from a close friend that would help shape his philosophy for years to come.

"It's not about the wins," Johns said, recalling the words of his mentor, Ken McDonald. "If you build a program, then the wins will take care of themselves. That's been my philosophy ever since. I know we

have great coaches, and I know we have great kids, so the wins are going to come."

Johns is now the athletic director at University School of Milwaukee (Wis.), which was named an Interscholastic Sports Program of Excellence honoree for its dedication to academic-based athletics. Coaches, administrators and teachers have joined together to create an environment where students can succeed both academically and athletically. That means worrying less about the numbers in the win columns and focusing heavily on the program's overall impact on an athlete's intellectual development.

That doesn't mean coaches don't want to win. The school effectively strikes a balance between its efforts in and out of the competitive arena, and the model works to near perfection.

"They tell us that it's not all about wins and losses," said football coach Brian Sommers. "To hear that from your boss, you know that you're doing the right thing."

Educating Leaders

A school's purpose is to educate students, but the best institutions also see the value in developing their staffs. That's a priority at University School of Milwaukee, and Johns makes every effort to



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– Rick Johns, athletic director

help his coaches earn certifications or attend clinics and seminars to improve their abilities.

That philosophy is another one shaped by Johns' own experience. Earlier in his career while working at another school, he was encouraged to pursue certification as an athletic administrator. Only he would have to do it on his own without assistance from the institution.

"I realized that was kind of a burden on me to do that and do the job," Johns said. "So when I came here as the athletic director, that's one thing I worked into my budget to not only train our athletic administrators but our coaches.

"Our coaches are not the highest-paid people — it's a stipend position.

PROGRAM OF EXCELLENCE JUDGE'S REMARKS

University School of Milwaukee did well in each of the judging categories, but I was really stuck with their 83 percent participation rate by their students. This is a great reflection of a successful program, since the students want to be involved and obviously get a great deal from being part of a team.

Also, the school's approach to coaching education and certification is outstanding. USM embraces

the "teacher-as-a-coach model," and then the school financially supports coaches in their efforts to grow, improve and become certified in their profession. Since all head coaches have earned their NFHS accredited interscholastic coach certification, the school definitely understands the value and importance of certification. Other schools should take a look at USM's approach and use it as a model for their own programs.

So how can I ask for them to pay for this on top of everything else they have to do?"

Nearly all coaches have participated in some form of professional development during their time at USM. It's a primary benefit to the job, but it's also reassurance that administrators are committed to investing in their futures along with the students.

Sylvester Cutler, assistant boys basketball coach and director of financial aid and admissions associate, said this is the first place

he has worked that allowed him to focus on professional development.

While attending a basketball clinic his second year at the school, he made a short drive to UMass in Amherst, Mass. There, he met assistant men's basketball coach Vance Walberg, who is credited with inventing the dribble-drive motion offense. They spoke for more than two hours.

"That's an experience I never would have had without the professional development opportunities here," Cutler said.



USM has won 24 team and individual state championships over the past five years.

Mike Sweet, a fourth-grade teacher who coaches football, agrees that continuing education is one of the school's strong suits. Whether it's a varsity football coach or a youth instructor leading a group of third graders, everyone is treated equally.

"I just coach fifth and sixth grade so you wouldn't think I get offered so many opportunities, but last year I attended a state clinic," Sweet said. "I think we were one of the only two middle schools that attended, but that was one of the training opportunities offered to us. Nobody falls through the cracks here."

Funding for professional development serves two purposes. Not only does it allow coaches to sharpen their own skills, but it assures Johns that student-athletes receive instruction from the most qualified individuals.

That's already high on Johns' priorities. Coaches are required to complete certain courses through the National Federation of State High School Associations before they begin leading their respective programs. There are additional courses they must take prior to their second and third seasons at the school.

Johns said he has no problem justifying professional development expenses in his annual budget. Most of the online courses are free, and the

clinics or seminars are all necessary in providing student-athletes with a positive experience.

"We are talking about student safety," Johns said. "Every penny we spend, it's all about how are we helping the kids. If we're helping them through student safety, it's easy justification."

No One Left Behind

Like a number of private schools around the nation, USM does not cut students from its athletic programs. That can have both positive and negative effects on all sports, but most coaches in Johns' department believe it benefits students in the long run.

The first challenge is playing time, but that hasn't become an issue. Coaches said there are the occasional problems, but every effort is made to provide adequate opportunities for all student-athletes.

Though the school doesn't cut any students, it does place athletes on junior varsity or other teams depending on their skills and the roles they'll play. If coaches believe an athlete will have a better experience playing off of the varsity team, it's a move they won't hesitate to make.

Part of the concept behind the no-cut rule is the idea that sports are an invaluable asset to education, and the

school doesn't want to deprive any student of a learning opportunity. It's through the practices and games that they'll learn competitiveness, teamwork and problem solving. All of which benefit them when they graduate and move on to greater things.

"It helps these kids learn leadership, it helps them learn their roles and how to be great teammates, and those skills translate to the real world," said Sommers, who only has about 30 kids on his football team. "Obviously, I'll take as many as I can get."

That creates a separate set of financial challenges. Johns said this year he had to add a third soccer team to accommodate all the incoming athletes. Additional teams leads to new expenses, but administrators won't hesitate to throw their support behind it.

"We think there are certain things you can learn on a field or court that you can't learn in the classroom," Johns said. "We want to give every one of our students the opportunity if they choose to do that. Our community expects that from us."

Accepting every willing student into the athletic program can be difficult, but several coaches use "role sheets" to alleviate some of the pressure. Athletes are asked prior to each season to complete the forms,

laying out their vision for how they'll best serve the team. Some athletes might see themselves as the leading scorer while others are motivational leaders. Either way, it helps the coach and athlete identify their expectations for the upcoming year.

Coaches said they meet with each athlete to review their role sheets. They're often discussed halfway through the year to make sure everyone is fulfilling their own expectations. That way they stay on task and remain accountable for their responsibilities.

Johns brought the role sheets idea to USM. He used the concept during his time as a football and baseball coach. It was an effective way to help the kids understand the expectations early on and allow them to feel more involved with the team.

It's similar to what teachers do in the classrooms when they discuss strengths and weaknesses with their students. Welcoming that concept into athletics gave coaches another instrument to help athletes learn.

"Every penny we spend, it's all about how are we helping the kids."

— Rick Johns, athletic director

"We try to do what we encourage all coaches to do, so we use it as a teaching tool and it's been very successful for us," Johns said. "I do the same thing with the coaches when we have preseason meetings and talk about what their goals are. We don't talk about wins and losses."

Academics First

USM athletics carry an 83 percent participation rate, and many of the students play two or three sports. That results in a significant time commitment for practices and games, but student-athletes still maintain



USM's main field is equipped with Pro Grass. Athletic Director Rick Johns said the artificial turf reduces catastrophic injuries to athletes.

a 3.46 GPA. They also helped the program earn 24 team and individual championships over the last five years.

The staff can't quite explain it, but students have developed superior time management skills, allowing them to balance academics with athletics. Johns points to the rigorous coursework, which builds confidence and a strong work ethic within each student. Another factor is the school-wide support, from tutors who put in extra hours to aid students to the parents who offer encouragement and support.

Johns said a significant number of students come up through the USM system, beginning in its grade school and finishing in the high school. They understand the expectations and that keeps them focused.

"We have a great academic support system, but a lot of it just comes from hard work," Johns said. "There is a four-year advising program and their advisors stay all the way through with the same kids."

"We believe in that NCAA Division III model that academics and athletics work together."

It's not often conflicts arise, but when they do they're easily resolved.

Coaches and teachers communicate regularly, and if a student needs to miss practice to study for an upcoming test, it's permitted. Coaches do everything they can to end practices early enough each evening to allow for students to study.

It helps that a majority of Johns' coaches also teach. The continuity between the field and the classroom develops and understanding between the coaches and athletes. It also builds a relationship that gives coaches an edge when connecting with their athletes.

Will Piper, coach and athletic coordinator at the middle school, said there are few coaches who don't work at the school. However, every effort is made to partner them with a teacher-coach to improve communications with athletes.

"We have the right coaches here who are able to understand kids and work with them," Piper said. "They understand the culture of the school. Academics come first, but they go hand in hand with athletics."

You can't have a one-size-fits-all for kids, and we're able to take our knowledge from the classroom and put it to work as coaches." **CAD**