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We're lucky here in the Diocese of Brooklyn to have a competitive CHSAA sports program across all three seasons.

The main factor that sets us apart is located right in the acronym. The "C" in CHSAA stands for "Catholic," and a newly formed club has adopted the mission to keep the primary emphasis on the C in CHSAA.

The CHSAA's Captains Club was formed right before the end of last school year. The principals and athletic directors met in June to discuss ways to be proactive about highlighting the important Catholic values of sports that are so prevalent in our league.

One of the ideas was to have each member school have representatives serving as the conduit between school and athletic administrators and their fellow student-athletes. As a result, the Captains Club was born.

Dom Vulpis, the CHSAA's executive director for Brooklyn and Queens for the past six years, is the club's moderator. All co-ed high schools have two reps – one boy and one girl – while the single-sex schools each have one member. These 31 student-athletes or team managers –selected by a school's principal and athletic director – meet virtually every month to discuss ways to get the message back to their home schools.

"We wanted to create an opportunity for both the coaches, parents, and students to have an idea of what it really should be if you're going to be playing in the CHSAA," Vulpis said. "Above all else would come the Catholic aspect."

Student-athletes try to listen to their coaches as best as possible, but the thought process behind the Captains Club is that an important message may take on a greater meaning if shared by a student peer. In just a few months, that mindset has already had a major impact.

"The Captains Club has been important for me to meet new people from different Catholic high schools and be able to come together to promote the 'C' in CHSAA," said Johann Batista, a senior varsity basketball point guard from Cristo Rey Brooklyn H.S., East Flatbush, who is looking to play Division III college hoops. "I am part of the mission statement committee, and we wrote our own new version of the CHSAA's code of conduct."

Over the summer heading into this school year, the club members took a course in captain's leadership from the National Federation of High Schools. This online course got them to start thinking about ways they could stand out as leaders as they began to develop their projects.

Vulpis' curriculum for the club was adopted from the New York State Education Department and focuses on the four C's of why athletics exist in schools: competence, character, civility, and citizenship. In the CHSAA, we add the fifth C: Catholic, of course.

"I remember in the Catholic Youth Organization, we prayed before every game, we read the code of conduct, and everyone was aware of our faith, following that faith, and playing according to that faith," said Laura Meoli, a senior varsity softball player at Fontbonne Hall Academy, Bay Ridge, who is a

member of St. Anselm's parish and who will be attending Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland on a softball scholarship. "This club has allowed me to bring that back into the high school league."

Each student was tasked to think of creative ways to bring back the values they learned over the first few months and make a presentation to the winter sports teams. Some chose PowerPoint presentations, while others chose to hang the CHSAA code of conduct around the school building.

At Archbishop Molloy H.S., Briarwood, the captains invited the faculty, parents, students, and alumni for a multi-faceted presentation to explain the club's mission and how it will be implemented among the Stanner faithful.

On Jan. 8, the club enjoyed Leadership Day, which started with Mass celebrated by Father Ralph Edel, chaplain at St. Francis Prep, Fresh Meadows, and the club's religious advisor. The morning presentation then featured Rob Birdsell, president of Catholic Virtual, which provides accredited online and blended learning programs to Catholic schools and students in the U.S. and worldwide.

The afternoon featured St. John's University, Jamaica, head women's volleyball coach and program founder Joanne Persico, a product of St. Francis Prep. She spoke about how the Catholic values she learned through sports paved the way for her current role.

All the members wore special T-shirts – designed by Meoli and the club's T-shirt committee – that support the captains' mission. Inscribed with the words "Faith, Sportsmanship, Leadership, Responsibility," the shirts are a reminder of what this club is trying to accomplish.

Already, the Archdiocese of New York, Diocese of Rockville Centre, and Archdiocese of Buffalo have expressed interest in forming a similar club following the Brooklyn/Queens model. Eventually, our diocesan club will set up a leadership council to run the meetings and help plan projects.