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Acalanes Female Athletic Board serves as voice for female student-athletes

By Jon Kingdon



FAB at a recent soccer game Photo Haley Walsh

One afternoon when Acalanes Athletic Director Randy Takahashi was cleaning out his office, he came upon some old issues of Blueprint, the school newspaper for Acalanes. As he scanned the articles, there were two stories that caught his attention. One was on the hidden issue of sexual abuse and the other, in which he was interviewed, was on gender equity.

These articles forced Takahashi to confront those very important concerns. "I was thinking about whether we had really addressed these issues, or did we just bring them to light," Takahashi said. "I may share the same vision and viewpoint of the girls but that is me looking at it from my lens. I wanted to establish a safe space for our female student-athletes to be able to meet, talk and discuss things about what is in the best interest of female sports at Acalanes."

Tatum Zuber, a junior and co-captain on the girls' soccer team, was asked by Takahashi what she thought about the formation of a group of female student-athletes to share their thoughts and ideas. "I told him I thought it was a good idea and so he said we would go for it," Zuber said.

Once that safe place was established, it took on the moniker of Female Athletic Board (FAB). Takahashi then asked Haley Walsh, an Acalanes teacher and the girls' volleyball coach to oversee the group because "I felt, as a male, if I was in there, the girls wouldn't have the same conversations and with Haley running things, it would make the conversation richer."

Walsh readily agreed to supervise the board meetings. "I had thought about different ways to support female athletes, being a female athlete myself, but I had not ever really thought about being on a board or with a group," Walsh said. "We've done a lot of equity work but one of the most discriminated groups historically tends to be women, so Randy wanted to make sure that gender equity was addressed as well."

Though the titular head of the group, Walsh made it clear who would be overseeing the meetings: "I wanted the girls to understand that they were running the meetings. This was a place for them to be heard. The girls have seen a lot of inequity issues and they're so used to it that they may not know how to address it or if there are even issues that need to be addressed."

An invitation was sent to all the female athletes informing them of the first meeting. "Ms. Walsh told us at the first meeting that this was a safe place for us to express how we felt about athletics at Acalanes," Zuber said. "It was there that we could be heard and have our ideas presented to the administration."

Takahashi has welcomed the ideas and comments from the female student-athletes. "They're taking an active role and looking at what we are doing in the athletic department and thinking about ways that we can improve things," Takahashi said. "I had a colleague that asked me if I was concerned this this might stir up some trouble for me. My response was that we should be able to start addressing what we need to do to make things better for everybody. We hear the voices of the females and asking the questions, 'Is it good, and how do we figure it out?'"

The board has been meeting outside once a month due to the coronavirus protocols. "Our meetings are very 'Camelot-like' with a round table discussion," Walsh said. "In our first meeting, we just talked about different topics and areas where the girls felt there could be improvements, ranging from equal apparel for the boys and girls teams, getting more female representation on the coaching staffs and getting more attendance from the student body at the girls' events."

From there the board went to the Acalanes website and compared the budgets for the boys and girls teams. "There wasn't a great difference and it showed that our district does a great job in supporting both the male and female athletes, but it was interesting to see which sports raised the most money and what they're spending it on," Walsh said.

Zuber cited the difference in gear provided to the boys and girls teams. "We got a backpack, parka and our jerseys," Zuber said. "The boys got sweatpants, windbreakers along with long and short sleeve jerseys. Though the overall budgets the teams received from the school are similar, there was far more additional money that went to the boys teams from outside donations."

This is an issue that Takahashi and the administration have already talked about and how to address it. "We've asked the question about having something in place that is more structured and having parameters for each program so that one team will not appear to have more than another," Takahashi said. "It's good that we're hearing from the girls on this issue and how it's important to them."

The differences in the budgets of the teams, gender aside, aligns with the number of players that go out for each sport. Much of the funding for each team comes from contributions from the families. "We take all of the expected expenses and potential revenue, and we then figure out what the difference is going to be, and then learning how many people are in the program will then determine how much we are going to ask the families for a contribution," said Takahashi. "It's not a fee and it's not mandatory but we do really appreciate the parents making the contribution because it really helps us fund our program. Our percentage of funding from the families is over 80%."

With far more attendance at the boys' games, the question then became on how to increase attendance at the girls' games. For Walsh, it was a matter of attacking the issue head-on. "The more we talked about it, we found that the lack of support for the girls' teams comes from a societal emphasis that stressed attending the Friday night football game, but never any emphasis on encouraging attendance at the girls' events," Walsh said. "What the girls found is that in order to change these norms, they would have to make it more normal to be supportive of the girls' teams. They concluded that in order to get more students to come to the girls athletic events, they needed to raise the expectations."

Zuber and the board wanted to demonstrate that with enthusiasm and effort, there can be larger crowds at the girls' games. "We got the school to promote going to our soccer games. We made posters and got commitments from the other teams to support each other's games," Zuber said.

Takahashi saw this as a very positive step. "We had a greater number of girls that showed up for the next soccer game and they were loud, positive, energetic and had a good time," Takahashi said. "It was a great thing."

A very valuable intangible has come out of the formation of the Female Athletic Board: the feeling of empowerment for the girls. "I believe that's true," Walsh said. "It's interesting to see the girls, some of whom are quiet in the school environment, come to the group and really start to speak up and be vocal in ways that that I had not seen in class, so it's really awesome to see them take this and turn it into a positive experience."

Zuber, who has always taken on the leadership role on her teams, said it has allowed her to find a new avenue to make her opinions known: "I definitely feel that my voice is being heard more and I am able to present ideas whereas before I would not have thought about bringing these issues up. It's given us an opportunity to express what we're seeing and feeling as our seasons have progressed."

Where does it go from here? "I believe that the boys teams will support the issues that we have brought up," Zuber said. "Our ultimate goal is for us to be able to draw the same type of crowds, get the same gear and be looked at as equals to the boys teams."

Takahashi is taking a long-term approach with the Female Athletic Board: "I'm glad that I'm able to hear what the girls are thinking but it's nice that they have been able to come together so they can feel that they have a voice and can talk, not only about things they feel need fixing but also to be able to rally around each other. This program is in its infancy but I really believe that this is going to be really good for us. I've been talking with one of our board members about the program and his comment was, 'This is so great I wish that this was going on throughout the entire district.' I just hope that we're doing the right thing."

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