Excitement for new sport builds in Howard County

By Jacob Steinberg

Howard County recently announced the addition of girls flag football as a high school sport for the 2026-27 school year, the eighth county in Maryland to introduce it. Excitement is plentiful because of its widespread interest and active youth participation.

For Howard sophomore Shaniyia Pierce, next fall can't come soon enough. Pierce comes from a football family and has always loved the sport. Her dad, Sean, is the varsity football coach at Walt Whitman High.

Pierce transferred to Howard late in her freshman year from Paint Branch where she played on the school's first girls flag football team. She described it as "a life-changing experience," citing the discipline the sport requires and the lifelong bonds she developed with teammates.

She is eager to take advantage of her unique position in having prior varsity experience and hopes to help her new teammates acclimate to the sport.

"I'm so excited for it, especially because I think one of the main things is now, I can take that mentality because they're probably going to have the same mentality I did [when I started]," Pierce said. "I was nervous about messing up, whether I'd do well.

"I'm excited to spread my knowledge of the game. I've already been talking to my friends about playing because it really is an amazing sport. I can't wait; it's like I have been waiting for this my whole life. It's going to be an amazing season."

Meanwhile, other athletes from around Howard County are excited for their debuts in the sport next fall, including Marriotts Ridge junior Katie Leader and Guilford Park junior Jaidyn Bichell. Leader, a

University of Delaware lacrosse commit, hadn't played a fall sport her first three years, while Bichell plays soccer in the fall.

Some of Leader's friends in other counties already play flag football and have given rave reviews. They lauded the competitive nature of the sport. Having not played a fall sport in the past, the lateral quickness and agility that is needed for flag football is easily transferable and beneficial for lacrosse in the spring.

Leader and many of her friends who are planning to play next year often throw the football around during physical education class. They're already discussing positions, and Leader has her eyes set on quarterback.

"I come from a baseball, football family, so I feel super excited that we have the opportunity to be able to play flag football," Leader said. "I've been around football a lot and obviously it's super exciting to watch. I think it's exciting that we get to start playing flag football, it's honestly so competitive and fun."

Before next fall, many Howard County girls at the 13 area high schools are getting their first glimpse of flag football in the coming weeks. A five-week season held between the conclusion of fall sports and winter break started Sunday with scrimmages. Games will soon follow.

The sport's inclusion into high school athletics is also a reflection of the increased interest at the youth level. Derek Jackson's first reaction to the announcement was: "It's about time." Jackson is a physical education teacher at Gorman Crossing Elementary School and has played a vital role in the surge of Howard County girls flag football.

He began working with Howard County Recreation & Parks in 2011, spending several years as the flag football program director where he coached and trained referees, athletes and coaches. Jackson also ran a small girls flag football league with his daughters and their friends before the COVID-19 pandemic.

After extensive conversations with Brian Wyman and Sunny Bhatia, they joined together to form Be You Sports, a nonprofit that launched in 2024 and offers a year-round girls flag football league for ages 5-to-15. Bhatia, the organization's vice president, chose the name to create an inclusive and safe environment for young women in athletics.

Jackson, who also works as the Be You Sports director of operations, coached 15 to 16 girls from his elementary school in the fall of 2023. That expanded to 70 girls in Be You Sports' inaugural league in spring 2024. Since, the league's accelerated exponentially and seen increased turnout because of word of mouth as well as partnerships with local businesses and the Baltimore Ravens.

This fall, there are over 175 girls participating from Howard and Anne Arundel counties in four age groups: 5-to-6, 7-to-9, 10-to-12 and 13-to-15.

"I think the barrier breaking opportunity for these girls to play one of the fastest growing sports in the world, you can't hold it back for too long," said Wyman, Be You Sports President. "These girls are going to find a way to play.

"I think now we've established that there's a good youth participation level in Howard County. Having it from college level to 5-year-olds up and down in Howard County, should make Howard County extremely proud."

However, Be You Sports is far from the only local organization with tremendous involvement in the sport. Wilde Lake football has run a coed flag football program at Harper's Choice and Wilde Lake middle schools since 2018-19.

Wilde Lake football coach Brian Henderson speaks at both middle schools each year to recruit new players. Henderson explained that every year more and more girls are asking if they can play. He estimated that roughly 20% of the league's participants are girls, the highest rate since it began.

When Wilde Lake fields its first team next fall, presumably many of the girls will have prior experience after playing in the middle school league. Henderson is hopeful that in the future flag football can be offered at all Howard County middle schools to help young athletes in their transition to high school.

“You get an exposure from some people that you may even be familiar with. That bridge means a lot, especially for new kids that are coming in, freshmen coming into high school,” Henderson said. “We know how tough that can be. To have some familiarity with a sport that can also help with the transition from middle to high school and they can actually continue to grow in the sport. That makes a big difference.”

Recent Glenelg graduate Jordyn Dodson-Jenson is eager for young girls to follow their passion and potentially find a new love in sports. Dodson-Jenson played tackle football at Glenelg as girls flag football wasn’t offered at the time.

Now, she’s a quarterback on the Mount St. Mary’s women’s flag football team set to debut this spring.

“Of course, there’s going to be lots of challenges. For those girls who do really want to play, I think it’s a really good opportunity if they weren’t comfortable doing tackle, but they still want to pursue football,” Dodson-Jenson said. “I just want to see girls that want to play, play. We don’t have to force anything.

“I think a lot of girls found their calling playing flag football with those counties that already have it. So, I just want to see, those younger girls coming into high school, if they really love this sport, get to have the opportunity to play it.”

While Howard County brought girls flag football to high school late, the sport’s enthusiasm at the youth level forecasts untapped potential and overwhelming optimism ahead.

“Now our girls have something definitely to look forward to, especially our young girls and that’s playing flag football in Howard County,” Jackson said. “Now that it’s in the Olympics they can have an even bigger goal if they want to chase that dream of not just stopping at high school.”

Have a news tip? Contact Jacob Steinberg at jsteinberg@baltsun.com, 443-442-9445 and x.com/jacobstein23.