

# Building New Athletic Leadership

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New this year, Westhill introduced the Westhill Athletics Leadership Academy, a program designed to strengthen individual athlete responsibility and build a solid foundation for student-athlete leadership. Its primary mission is to cultivate and develop key leadership skills in prospective team captains through the study of values, processes, and behaviors that drive both personal and team success.

Mr. Ng, history teacher, and Coach Miller, girl's soccer coach, developed and organized this program with the support of the Athletic Director, Mr. Cerone. Together, they created a structure that would help students build real leadership skills and strengthen their role within their respective teams and the school community.

The coaches noticed a gap in leadership across many teams, not just with captains. The Academy gives athletes a chance to reflect on their role, build accountability, and develop real leadership skills

using the Janssen book, a publication dedicated to teaching athletes responsibility, from making choices to finishing tasks, and helping coaches build more self-reliant team members.

The goal, according to Mr. Ng, is to move from self-regulation, to helping a group, to leading with confidence. This is meant to reinforce responsibility and reflection. These lessons are meant to help students become stronger leaders in sports, the classroom, and other activities. By reflecting on past choices and learning to hold themselves accountable, students can continue to grow and improve.

So the purpose of this is to have a time of structured reflection, where they don't need to just sit there and reflect, how can I be a better leader?

But instead, go through lessons and activities that would ask them the questions of what makes a leader and how have you been doing so then they could do that reflection be-

fore they even think about, how do I get other people to do what I want them to do?" Ng said.

Athletes hoping to become team captains are required to complete the academy. The full four-year curriculum, intended for incoming freshmen, will be comprehensive, while current upperclassmen are participating in an accelerated program.

"Most kids had been chosen as a captain without any training or any real understanding. Some kids do, but most kids don't really understand what that means, and it's not always clear between the coach and the kid.

So we just thought it was a way to get everybody on the same coach and provide the student athletes with an avenue to develop the knowledge base that they need." Cerone said.



**WESTHILL PRIDE** A Westhill football player remains focused during a game. Photo by Tamara Hill ('26).

Athletes seem positive about the program and its offerings.

"I think this program will help me focus on bettering myself before helping to better others. Sometimes it is easy to uplift others and be there for them but in order to do that effectively, you should do it for yourself as well. I also hope to learn ways to keep the entire team engaged and happy throughout the entirety of the season," Farah Uzicanin ('27) said.

In their freshman year, athletes are introduced to the importance of personal responsibility within a team setting. A Google Classroom provides readings and modules that help them identify individual strengths, take ownership of their actions, and understand how their choices affect the team.

"I think it's going to be extremely beneficial. I think it will give student athletes an opportunity to see what it means to be a leader before stepping into that role." Coach Loiacono, freshman girls' volleyball coach, said.

As sophomores, athletes dive deeper into examining their level of

commitment, especially as they prepare for varsity play and increased team responsibilities. The year of the program focuses on Westhill's athletic culture, exploring the values and expectations needed for strong leadership and overall program success.

"Our program is amazing in the relationships we build. That said, having athletes understand that we are all here for each other and their own happiness comes first is something that we really should help emphasize to teammates, as it can be easy to get caught up in the negatives," Uzicanin said.

"I really believe the captain's program has the potential to be a tremendous positive for every athlete, not just the ones looking to be a captain. When it's done well, it can build a foundation for leadership that athletes can carry with them on and off the court in terms of how to be a captain, and how to relate to their teammates in positive, program building ways," Mr. Russo, girls JV and varsity volleyball coach said.



**TURKEY BOWL** Westhill boys face off against Stamford High for the annual Thanksgiving Day football game.