

# SPORTING

## Faith before the fight

Senior football player Miguel Hernandez kneels in the end zone and prays before pre-season opener against Lake Mary High School. The Lions won this game 14-9. Unpictured, many of Hernandez's teammates kneel in the end zone to pray.

Photo by Acovan Schild



# Faith

## How the students at Oviedo High School recognize their right to pray



story by Gigi Decesare

Students settle into the student section, while parents talk to whoever is next to them. The bleachers buzz with conversation and excitement. On the field, players finish their warm-ups, talk to their coach, and some head to the end zone, kneel down, and pray.

Under Section 8532 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, schools cannot deny students the right to pray. At Oviedo High School, many students exercise this right on and off the field. However, the most public displays are from under the Friday night lights and on early Saturday mornings.

As the season has progressed, in each game, a greater group of players make their way to the endzone after the national anthem, drop to one knee, and say a prayer.

"I've done it my entire career, and it just helps me remember to play for him [God], he's allowing me to play," Juan Carlos Payano, a junior and varsity football player, said.

It's not a requirement, but many players make this same choice before a game. Regardless of religion or belief, the players use this as a way to come together. There's no judgment, only unity under a shared knowledge and acceptance of their brothers and their choices.

However, one of the most important aspects of the federal law is that a religious student can choose to, or not to, make this choice. No teacher or administrator will stop a student from praying or force them to.

"There is no question about it. I

don't need to explain myself. I just get to speak what I've always thought," Payano said.

Senior Olivia Lunardi, a varsity girls cross country athlete, echoes this sentiment. "When I first started praying before meets, I would get nervous just because it was a

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Carla Chavez Ramirez

little bit out of my comfort zone to pray in front of others," Lunardi said.

Lunardi's teammates are accepting, allowing her to face a welcoming atmosphere any time she prays, removing any nerves she may have had about praying in front of others. Offering a welcome atmosphere in return, Lunardi's pre-race prayers are an event open to all, religion or belief aside.

"[Praying] in a community like cross country where everyone is

honor, and it's something I look forward to every meet."

And to her teammates, this prayer brings them comfort.

"As a cross country athlete, the biggest challenge when performing is definitely just mentality. Because, as they say, races are 10% physical and 90% just mental mind games. So just praying beforehand helps you keep Jesus close with you and keep that in mind during tough times" Carla Chavez Ramirez, junior and varsity cross country captain, said.

What aspect of Oviedo creates room for such respect from teammates? While it has a population of around 40,000 people, most Oviedo students would say the town of Oviedo has a small town feel. It goes back to the 'spirit of Oviedo,' which is responsible for the family aspect that is strongly held by most of the Oviedo teams. Oviedo is a community that values this sort of relationship, and it can be seen in athletics.

"With football, our team has grown up with each other since we were little, so we have that brotherhood that a lot of teams don't have," Johnnie Cobbs, a

junior and varsity football player, said.

This brotherhood breeds tolerance; players don't have to worry about judgment. And while these athletes have many different reasons for praying, the common thread between them is having a way to bring their team together.

"It brings all of us together as a team," Payano said. "I'm just grateful that I don't have to say anything to them about praying, they just know."

### Video



Chavez Ramirez shares in this comfort and appreciates the ability to pray with her team.

"[Praying] is really valuable because we always—no matter what type of race it is, if we're running late or however important it is—we set that time aside to all come together, past our religious differences, past our times during races, and just have that unity," Chavez Ramirez said.

This bond isn't limited to cross country or football, however. Many other sports, including this year's state champions, the Oviedo girls volleyball team, pray before their matches.

"Right before the game, we do jumping jacks and then pray, Delaney always prays," Maddie Mehring, a junior and varsity volleyball player, said.

Whether in the RWL Gym, on the John Courier Field, or on the dirt path of a cross country course, students at Oviedo High School will always have room to pray. It's more than protection under the law; it's the space created by the students and community of Oviedo, a space for different beliefs and different types of people to come together under one word: team.



The girls cross country varsity team is lead in prayer by Olivia Lunardi before a meet at Osceola High School. Before every meet this team warms up, does drills as a team, runs striders, and then participates in a team prayer. They end this pre-game ritual with a team cheer.

Photo by Samantha Lebron

really accepting makes it easier," Lunardi said. "It's been really good for me to just be able to speak out and also be there for my teammates. And now they will come to me if they need prayer, or everyone's excited for the team prayer. It's honestly been an