

## **Willowbrook Flag Football Support Team: Biography information**

It's a unique and special experience when an idea not only comes to fruition, but is so historic and transformative, it impacts the entire school, state and nation. A team of staff members at Willowbrook High School made this happen during the 2022-23 school year.

When the team approached administration in spring 2022 with the desire to implement Girls Flag Football, no one could have imagined the tremendous success and powerful effect that followed a few months later. Under the team's guidance, 33 students embarked on what would become a historic journey. The girls finished the regular season unbeaten and outscored their opponents 166-0. They won the first-ever Conference Championship, the inaugural Chicago Bears Girls Flag State Championship and the regional tournament in Ohio. These accomplishments qualified them for the NFL FLAG Championships at the NFL Pro Bowl in Nevada.

Throughout the season, the team embodied its motto of, "Be one of the first, but not the last." The group understood the significance and responsibility of driving the sport forward and helping build the foundation for future generations.

### **Willowbrook High School Flag Football Support Team**

- Co-Head Coaches Rachel Karos (physical education teacher, Student Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator, Co-Curricular Coordinator, head softball coach and volleyball coach) and Nick Hildreth (former Learning Services Department Head and head football coach)
- Assistant Coach Jamal Thomas
- Ed Sullivan (former math teacher and Co-Curricular Coordinator and current Athletic Director, who served as the announcer during the games)
- Charlie Hoehn and Nick Beausoleil (Technology Department staff members, who livestreamed many of the games)

## **Willowbrook Flag Football Support Team: Essay**

While the obvious defining accomplishment of the Willowbrook High School Flag Football Support Team is guiding the 2022-23 group to a historic season (the girls finished the regular season unbeaten and outscored their opponents 166-0; won the first-ever Conference Championship, the inaugural Chicago Bears Girls Flag State Championship and the regional tournament in Ohio; and competed in the NFL FLAG Championships at the NFL Pro Bowl in Nevada), the team is well aware of the “bigger picture” and more important achievements.

Implementing Flag Football at the school has created tremendous opportunities for a diverse group of female students, including exposing them to athletics, providing once-in-a-lifetime experiences and opening access to scholarships. About 36 percent of students at Willowbrook are low income, more than 30 percent are Hispanic and 40 languages are spoken by students and families. The school and community embrace this diversity as an asset, and Willowbrook focuses on cultivating an inclusive environment, where all students feel they belong and have options to get involved.

The success of the Flag Football Team created a culture of excitement and pride – not only within the Willowbrook High School community, but throughout the state and nation as well. There was a palpable buzz of enthusiasm, and the girls received recognition from local leaders at the Village of Villa Park, as well as awards throughout the state and nation.

Throughout the season, the team embodied its motto - “Be one of the first, but not the last.” The group understood the significance and responsibility of driving the sport forward and helping establish the foundation for the future. During the games, young girls filled the stadium and pictured themselves competing on the field. The Willowbrook student-athletes truly served as role models, inspiring the next generation. Willowbrook also partnered with the community to start a youth flag football team.

The Willowbrook High School Flag Football Support Team also has met with local school districts to help them establish flag football teams. The momentum has been so powerful and successful that flag football is on its way to being named as an Illinois High School Association (IHSA)-sponsored sport and was recently named as an Olympic sport.

It’s difficult to capture, quantify and measure the impact this group has made, but the legacy built will continue to be felt for years to come.

**Willowbrook Flag Football Support Team: Letter of Recommendation from Willowbrook Principal Dr. Daniel Krause**

At Willowbrook High School, we pride ourselves on providing unique experiences for all students to cultivate an inclusive environment and a sense of belonging. We encourage our faculty to be creative and innovative, and we often joke that we work hard to never say “no” to an idea.

This was never more evident than when a group of staff members requested to implement Flag Football during the 2022-23 school year. We knew it would create an amazing experience for our female student-athletes, but we had no idea the doors it would open. It isn't often you get to be part of something that's the first ever in existence, and this dynamic support team made that happen. The girls had early success and finished the regular season unbeaten and outscored their opponents 166-0. They then won the first-ever Conference Championship, the inaugural Chicago Bears Girls Flag State Championship and the regional tournament in Ohio. These accomplishments qualified them for the NFL FLAG Championships at the NFL Pro Bowl in Nevada.

While those achievements are unbelievable and led to tremendous opportunities and national media attention and accolades, what's more impressive is the legacy built by this group. The student-athletes serve as role models for young girls, inspiring the next generation. They are expanding opportunities for females to get involved in athletics and to earn scholarships. They are truly pioneers, and they couldn't have done it without the support team listed below.

Co-Head Coaches Nick Hildreth and Rachel Karos and Assistant Coach Jamal Thomas led with their trademark patience, quiet strength and uncanny ability to build authentic relationships with each student. While their knowledge of the sport and natural athletic abilities are outstanding, what's more impressive is their connection with each girl and their gift to inspire and motivate students to be their best each and every day. Ed Sullivan, who is now the Athletic Director at Willowbrook, helped create a buzz of excitement for Flag Football in the community and throughout the state and nation as the announcer during the games, and Charlie Hoehn and Nick Beausoleil with the Technology Department helped the team gain attention through livestreaming the games.

Coach Karos and Coach Hildreth said it best.

“At the beginning of the season, I asked the girls what it means to be the first Willowbrook Flag Football Team, and they understood that this is bigger than them,” Karos said. “They are laying the foundation for what we hope will be a bright future for the sport at local, state and national levels. There's no better sport to show equity and equality than football. It has typically been a male-dominated sport, and to be part of a school that has always found ways to get girls involved is amazing.”

Hildreth agreed.

“By far, this was the best athletic experience of my life,” Hildreth said. “There’s no better group to take this and drive it forward. Having a daughter who’s 9 years old, these girls are role models and a team to look up to.”

This is who we are as Willowbrook Warriors – it starts with an idea, and that idea becomes a dream, and that dream becomes a reality because of the passion and commitment of our staff. The leadership of this support team will be felt for years to come.

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