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At AIM Academy, an extraordinary athletics and physical education program helps Makana Newman and other students with learning differences gain momentum on and off the field.

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Senior Makana Newman stars on AIM Academy's varsity basketball, soccer, and lacrosse teams. "The whole experience has been really rewarding for me," she says.

Leveling the Playing Field

At **AIM Academy**, an extraordinary athletics and physical education program helps students with learning differences gain momentum on and off the field.

In the world of high school athletics, Makana Newman is a proverbial triple threat. Newman stars on AIM Academy's varsity basketball, soccer, and lacrosse teams. She has also emerged as a skillful leader, having fulfilled the role of captain for each of those teams over the past two years.

"Being captain has taught me patience, and it has also helped me connect more with my teammates," she says. "I've also become the person that other kids come to when they're struggling with something, even before they go to the coach. ... The whole experience has been really rewarding for me."

As a three-sport athlete who has earned All-Star, All-League, and Athlete of the Year honors, Newman has learned vital lessons

in time management, teamwork, and perseverance. Newman, who has dyslexia, believes she likely would not have been able to enjoy the same opportunities had she gone elsewhere.

"I had been at [another Philadelphia-area school] before coming to AIM in third grade," she says. "It was a really hard school academically, so there's no way I would have been able to play a sport there. I'm able to play three sports at AIM, and I feel like it has prepared me for college, on and off the field, and helped me grow as a person."

She is among the 400-plus students in grades one through 12 at AIM in Conshohocken, the Philadelphia area's largest school devoted to educating children with language-based learning differences such as dyslexia,

dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. Through personalized and evidence-based instruction, as well as innovative learning tools and hands-on opportunities, the school aspires to help students lead, learn, and develop skills that will serve them now and into the future.

"At AIM, athletics aren't separate from learning; they're an extension of it," explains Head of School Annette Fallon. "As we continue to invest in and grow our programs, students experience success on the field, in the gym, or on a bike, building confidence that carries directly into the classroom and into their sense of self. For students with learning differences, growing their confidence is transformational."

Director of Athletics and Physical Education Bruce Nkala, Ph.D., recognizes the vital role athletics play in students' development. He speaks from personal experience, as athletics have taken him on a globetrotting journey. His career began in his native Botswana and led to posts at prestigious schools in Silver Spring, Maryland, and Cam-

bridge, Massachusetts, as well as almost a decade at The Shipley School in Bryn Mawr, before coming to AIM in 2024.

"A bug bites you when you love athletics," he says. "You have opportunities to travel, the social elements ... and you cannot substitute the physical literacy that comes from athletics."

At AIM, all students from grades one through eight participate in physical education. The experience helps students build endurance, upper body strength, and cardiovascular fitness, and also affords them the confidence to explore organized athletics. Nkala is particularly proud of AIM's Junior Wolf Pack program, in which lower school students learn the ins and outs of team sports and developmental squads that cater to any student who wants to play.

"I want students to be well coached and have great leadership skills," he says, adding that he would love to see a dynasty of excellence at AIM. "Now that we're able to start working with middle school students, we can go from a four-year [athletic] program to an eight-year program."

AIM's athletics and physical education program provides each student with coaching designed for optimal learning and performance, no matter where they may be on the continuum of athletic development. Elite student athletes are challenged in order to compete for championships and get recruited by colleges. Mid-level athletes receive targeted instruction to sharpen their skills. Those with growing skills benefit from beginner-level exposure.

Since Nkala's arrival, the school's athletics program has taken dramatic steps forward, including the addition of new sports such as wrestling. He says AIM will continue to explore growth opportunities, particularly for the lower and middle schools, while using his own cutting-edge research and advanced tools such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence to elevate the program's stature.

"I feel like I won the lottery with this job," Nkala adds. "The program was on the cusp of becoming great when I came here. The school was hungry for competition, and it was important to have a participatory model, an inclusive model, to satisfy that hunger. It's important for every student to have an opportunity to represent the school, no matter what. We have to keep asking the question: How do we put them in that position?"

Most days, Jeff Fetterman feels like his job is too good to be true. As AIM's Upper

Athletics are an extension of learning at AIM Academy, says Head of School Annette Fallon. Success on the field, in the gym, or on a bike helps students build confidence, which "carries directly into the classroom and into their sense of self."



Sam's Place, an in-house bike shop/classroom, is home to a certified bike repair course, a NICA Varsity Mountain Biking team, and a vibrant middle school biking program. Here, Upper School Cycling Program Coordinator Jeff Fetterman instructs students in tuning up a bicycle.

School Cycling Program Coordinator and teacher of "Adrenaline Zen," an experiential, elective class for upper school students, Fetterman spends as much time as possible outside with students—leading bike rides, teaching survival skills, and, in kinder weather, exploring the area around the Schuylkill River Trail behind AIM.

"What most people do on weekends, I get to do during the week with our students,"

Fetterman says. "Getting kids outside and on bikes—that's my passion. Whether we're building debris shelters, riding mountain bikes, or making food at the outdoor fire pit ... those kinds of interactions help them work harder and focus better on their schoolwork."

A cycling program like this, designed to develop real-world skills, is unique in the independent school space. AIM's program encompasses a bike repair course, a NICA Varsity Mountain Biking team that has been competing for close to 10 years, and a vibrant middle school biking program. The hub for these experiences is Sam's Place, an in-house bike shop/classroom named after the late AIM alum and cycling enthusiast Sam Ozer '20. The space, outfitted entirely by donations including Trek Bikes, is where Fetterman teaches Project Bike Tech classes, where students can become certified bike mechanics.

"We'll take donated bikes, tune them up, and donate them back to children in Philadelphia and Montgomery County," Fetterman says. "I call it modern-day home economics. I teach them how to use tools and their hands to fix things and problem solve, helping them discover how important this work is to develop muscle memory and fine motor skills."

Sam's Place also facilitates interactions between students and community members. Students not only work closely with representatives of partner organizations such as the Whitemarsh Township Police Department and the area nonprofit Girls in Gear, but also engage casually with interested passersby.

"My favorite thing about what I do is getting to watch the kids struggle and succeed, working with tools, and then watching the light bulbs go on," Fetterman says. "I also love seeing our students get to work with the community in a meaningful and natural way."

Such opportunities have helped students such as Makana Newman grow, evolve, and prepare for wherever life leads them next. In her case, that means college. She has whittled her higher-education choices down to two Division III schools: one in California, the other in Central Pennsylvania. No matter where she decides to go, she expects to play lacrosse—though her goals far exceed athletics.

"I want to continually be a better person, to be more vocal, and to be a role model for others," she says. "My plan is to major in occupational therapy, exercise science. Ultimately, no matter what I do with my life, I know I want to help people." ■