

St. Mary's softball team meets Pope Francis

By PATRICK J. BUECHI
Staff Reporter

The St. Mary's High School travel softball team hit a grand slam this summer. They won the Msgr. Martin League Championship, toured Italy and tagged the pope outside the Vatican.

The team credits Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame member Mike Rapp, who retired from coaching Canisius College softball in 2014, but returned to his alma mater, St. Mary's, to make this happen. While working as assistant coach for the Lancers, Rapp mentioned that he had contacts in Rome and could set up an exhibition game with some teams in Italy. Hoping to give the girls some life experience, St. Mary's head of school, Kevin Kelleher, agreed.

Rapp had made regular trips to Italy while at Canisius. He suggested organizing a travel team and going again.

"We hand-picked a group of kids that we thought would do well over there and have good experiences over there. We asked 12 kids, they all said yes and we, on the fly, put a trip to Italy together," said Missy Hufford, team manager.

The team, consisting of players from the Lancaster high school and surrounding area, played four exhibition games against Italian teams, with Italian rules. Some of those players are preparing for the 2020 Olympics, but they proved no match for St. Mary's.

"We beat them pretty good," said Caitlin Bish, shortstop.

On Aug. 9, the team visited the Vatican's Paul VI Hall for Pope Francis' weekly general audience. An estimated 8,000 people attended, but a few of the St. Mary's crew managed to get closer than most.

While waiting for the entire group of players and parents to gather, a papal guard tried to push those present to go inside. Hufford's husband, Kevin, requested more time.

"(The guard) said, 'Sir, Poppa.' Kevin turned around and the pope was like (three feet away). He walked right up to this little boy next to Kevin, and this little boy is screaming 'Poppa.' Just hearing the excitement in this little



COURTESY OF ST. MARY'S HIGH SCHOOL

Erin Hufford, a St. Mary's High School graduate who played on the school's travel softball team, receives a personal greeting and blessing from Pope Francis. The St. Mary's softball team traveled to Rome for a series of exhibition games with Italy. During their time off, the girls attended the pope's regular Wednesday morning address.

boy's voice and the pope coming over and hugging him. He shook Kevin's hand. He walked into this room and everybody erupted. You felt like a rock star was coming in," Hufford explained.

Pope Francis has a reputation of gravitating towards the youth. He even fist bumped the teens.

"He was a lot more personable than I expected him to be," said Bish.

"He wasn't in a hurry. He was taking his time, just strolling through and saying hi to everybody. It was very cool," said Hufford.

Missy's daughter, Erin Hufford, a St. Mary's graduate, who returned to play on the team, shook hands with the pope.

"I thought it was awesome, especially to be in that situation with the pope right there," she said.

"We didn't have any idea that he was even going to walk near us. Then when we realized it, honestly, the sense that came over us was overwhelming. It was kind of like, I don't want to say 'out of this world,' but it was. It didn't feel real."

For hours after the encounter, the

girls were still in shock.

Pope Francis spoke on Jesus forgiving sinners. He ended his talk by offering a special greeting to the English-speaking guests. A series of bishops and cardinals, also spoke in their native tongues to the crowd of mixed nationalities.

"Upon all of you, I invoke the grace of the Lord Jesus, that you may be a sign of mercy and Christian hope in your homes and communities. May God bless you," he said.

"What I got out of it was, with all the different languages, everybody from all around the world was basically united under the same religion, and with the tough times people are going through and all the bad things happening in the world that there is a community of people throughout the world that support each other," said Bish.

Erin Hufford, 18, was in Mythology class on her first day in college, when someone mentioned the pope.

"I turned to the person next to me and said, 'I met him.' They're like, 'No, you didn't,'" she said. So, this was truly an unbelievable experience.

SOUND BOARD

Gifts from God come with four legs and tail

By MADALYN GALDON
Christ the King, Snyder

Hope and Hudson. They are two of the most important words in my life.

Nearly two years ago, my parents picked me up from school and drove me out to Medina. They pulled into the driveway of a house I had never seen before. A lady walks out of the front door carrying a very tiny, fuzzy creature. I jumped out of the car coming to the realization that after years of begging and pleading, my parents finally got me a dog of my own. And I knew the perfect name for her, Hope. She was the absolute love of my life.

On Christmas Eve last year, Hope's parents had another litter of puppies. A few weeks later, my father and I traveled out to pick out another. I had my eyes on a caramel-colored girl with a black spot on her nose, but someone had a different idea. While I was sitting on the floor holding my prospective new puppy, I heard the loudest yelp you'd ever heard out of a four-week old puppy behind me.

This chubby ball of fur began crawling all over me, almost pushing the other puppy out of my lap. I thought I would be picking another puppy; I wasn't expecting for the puppy to pick me. That loud, little boy was soon named Hudson.

My dogs have completely changed my life. As I'm writing this, Hope is sleeping in my lap, and Hudson is chewing on my elbow, trying to get me to play.

About six years ago, I was diagnosed with hypertension from an ongoing illness that nearly took my life. As a result, I developed post-traumatic stress disorder and depression at age 11.

Since then, I've also been diagnosed with anxiety. I have panic attacks almost every day, and I sometimes find it difficult to gather the strength to get out of bed. But, I have two lovable balls of fur that put a smile on my face every morning. Seeing October is the month of St. Francis of Assisi's feast day, I decided it would be the perfect to write about how thankful I am for my amazing pups. Without them, I know I wouldn't have come as far as I have on my road to recovery. God has blessed me with two of the smartest animals on earth, and I thank Him for them every minute.