McCALLIE

HONOR TRUTH DUTY

Enduring Values and Excellence in a New Era of High School Football

Announcement by Head of School Lee Burns '87
Monday, November 16, 2026

We want every McCallie boy to explore and experience enriching learning opportunities beyond the classroom. We are fortunate to offer a wide range of extracurricular activities, from the arts to athletics, with 51 athletic teams in 19 sports and approximately 50 non-athletic extracurricular activities. I am proud of the range of activities, the commitment and talents of our boys as they enjoy them, and the overall excellence in each activity or team. From the stage and theater to the fields and courts and trails, McCallie boys are learning, growing, and excelling.

Today, though, I want to communicate with you about one extracurricular area, athletics, and one particular sport, football.

Athletics, teamwork, and competition are important parts of growing into manhood. They are excellent places to teach, mentor, and learn so many powerful and enduring life lessons, and McCallie will do this in the right way—with honor, truth, and duty.

The landscape of high school athletics has been and is experiencing a number of significant changes, even disruptions—some of which we believe threaten to undermine the highest ideals and principles of secondary school athletics. This is particularly the case for football.

A number of our students, faculty and staff, coaches, parents, alumni, and the broader community have asked how McCallie is and will be responding to these changes, pressures, disruptions, and challenges. These include, but are not limited to, new TSSAA policies and state laws relating to earning compensation for NIL, the relaxation of traditional residency requirements, and greater transfer flexibility.

We have competed for many years in our DII football league and appreciate and respect our fellow schools and the shared commitments we all have to educating young people. We respect the healthy rivalries we enjoy with them and the high caliber football that is vigorously played.

Recently, however, a very small number of schools in our league have constructed super-elite football teams, with an assemblage of on-field talent at levels unprecedented in our league. This is not just having one superstar player, but having a multitude of elite players. These teams have a critical mass of athletes who are elite players with a trajectory to play college football in the SEC or other Power Four schools. While schools in our league have often had a few such players, our league has never seen such a large and concentrated number at several schools as we now have. This wide and growing disparity of talent, coupled with seemingly very different philosophies about high school football among some schools, contributed to the decision by four schools in our league to opt out of a league schedule and thus forfeit post-season play for the next two years.

Like some of the other schools in our league, we have the financial resources we could commit to fielding a super-elite football team. For a host of good reasons, both philosophical and practical, we have chosen not to and will continue not to.

Our philosophy and position at McCallie remains clear. Football has been, remains, and will be a mission-aligned sport. No sport, activity, or program supersedes our mission nor will be inconsistent with it. A boy's overall development, especially his character and faith, as well as his academic growth, is our first priority.

Football is a powerful platform and way to foster in boys good and important character traits and life skills. It is a strong and shared experience of struggles, adventures, and brotherhood. It is a profound opportunity for mentoring by outstanding role models. We want many, many boys to experience this. We believe that being a part of the varsity football team should be accessible to many boys—all who are willing to embrace the high standards and work ethic required. That accessibility includes the many boys who play middle school football at McCallie.

While we will continue, happily and proudly, to have some elite players who may go on to play football at a high level in college, we do not seek to be a team consisting in large measure of such players. As has been our history, we desire a team that includes a large number of boys who potentially will never play college football, but who enjoy and embrace the essence of high school football. Such boys have long been vital in our football program, and they will remain so. A super-elite team can crowd out and chase away such boys. It can also change the culture of a football program, perhaps even a school.

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While we will not have a super-elite team, we will have an excellent team and one that develops the football talents of each boy. In the last seven years, we have won five state championships. We have certainly had talented players, but we have won our championships in a league in which, each year, several other teams had more elite players than we did. We win our championships primarily because of our culture, character, coaching, and conditioning.

We are proud of our winning—and we certainly do not apologize for it—because we have done it the right way, with mission-fit boys of good character who meet our high academic standards. They are boys who embrace the full McCallie experience. I am proud of our boys—off and on the field. In those times when we lose, we show class and character.

We are proud of our winning—and we certainly do not apologize for it—because we have done it the right way, with mission-fit boys of good character who meet our high academic standards.

While we recently concluded our season with a quarterfinal playoff loss, our young men and coaches, that night and throughout a tough season, displayed tremendous character, brotherhood, pride, grit, spirit, and sportsmanship. While the scoreboard at the field didn't show what we sought, the ways they practiced, conditioned, and played developed championship caliber McCallie men. As a school community, we are and should be proud of them and of the ways we approach football.

Our approach is not to construct a team like a college or pro team. Our coach is not akin to a professional league general manager. Our approach is not to buy talent or be transactional. It's not to apply practices of college recruiting. It's not to traffic in agents and boosters and deals and inducements. It's to transform boys, to build young men in a culture that brings out their collective best.

We strive to field an excellent football team comprised of good young men who will battle together to win the right way.

We are not interested in being a farm team for the SEC. We are not interested in being a football academy or a national football powerhouse. We are not going to overspend tuition dollars or philanthropic dollars on football. Football will remain in proper balance and perspective at McCallie. Football may be the most public thing we do, but it is not the most important thing we do.

We believe in the importance and value of football. We also believe in the value of spirited competition, healthy rivalries, and excellence in athletics—all of which contribute in good and important ways to student experience, community-building, and school pride. The benefits and significance of football are many. It is important that we have an excellent football team.

We will be excellent at football, and we will do it the right way, including abiding by the letter and spirit of rules and insisting that all members of our community—including players and their parents, employees and school supporters—do the same. We won't copy what others may be doing or may elect to do, nor will we chase championships as the ultimate aim. We will be a good and fair member of our league, respectful of the common good and the responsibilities and duties we have as such.

It takes intentionality and commitment to find and stay on a narrow path of excellence done with ideals and integrity in today's landscape. There are temptations and pressures to take shortcuts, misorder priorities, compromise values, or downplay or circumvent rules. It takes character and courage to resist.

As we pursue this path, we are and will be in conversations with other like-minded schools. It is our hope and belief that there exists a critical mass of schools who will join us in affirming the highest ideals and principles of high school athletics. I am reminded of eight colleges in and around New England who, in 1945, had grown so concerned about the commercialization of college football and its threat to undermine their academic standards, missions, and fair play that they established the Ivy Group, which in 1954 became the Ivy League. These schools agreed to hold themselves to higher standards than the basic rules promulgated by the NCAA. Not that we aspire to or compare ourselves to those eight schools and their league, but there may be lessons for us in how those university presidents collaborated to establish higher principles of mission-aligned athletics.

Ideally, an alliance of like-minded independent schools in Tennessee will link arms to hold ourselves to higher standards than what we sometimes see and hear about today and worry even more about for tomorrow. I am committed to collaborating with other school heads to forge a better path for the future.

Meanwhile, and regardless of what happens outside of McCallie, we are committed to doing this the McCallie way. From our Board to our administration to our coaches, we are aligned and united. We share an unwavering commitment to McCallie's mission and to doing things the right way. Together with Athletic Director Kenny Sholl and head football coach Joel Bradford, we are actively working through how best to support our student-athletes and steward our football program in a rapidly changing high school landscape. Fortunately, we do this from a position of strength. We are blessed with mission clarity and alignment, with a culture of excellence, with a history of high achievement, with hard working and talented boys, and with outstanding facilities and resources. Most importantly, we are blessed to have coaches, teachers, and administrators who care more about character and culture than they do about championships. As we do now, we are going to compete for championships with character and develop championship-caliber men.

Go Big Blue!!