

Varsity jackets spark controversy

In light of a new order of varsity jackets coming in with a new design and an undecided method of distribution between teams, athletes and non-athletes reflect on their view of the School's well-known jackets up to now.

Elena Alexander / Sports Editor: Print

Pete Stathopoulos ('23) went downstairs to the athletic equipment room to pick up his varsity jacket for the first time in September 2021. Stathopoulos said he was excited because the jacket was a symbol – a subtle statement that's not “in your face” – for getting into varsity.

“Once you make the team for the first time, the first thing you kind of think of is ‘when am I getting my jacket,’” Stathopoulos said.

Many recognize athletic jackets around the school. Walking in the halls, the black windbreakers with “ASL” written in bold orange letters on the back are often hard to miss.

Background

Nowadays, the jackets are known as “varsity jackets” among the student body, but Athletics Director John Farmer said they were not always just for varsity athletes.

Farmer said the jackets used to be mandatory purchases for all High School athletes. Farmer said a change in the school's policy in 2014 meant that the school started loaning out the jackets for athletes, and eventually, the athletes would have to give back the jackets at the end of the season. If an athlete didn't return their jacket, they would pay an £80 fee.

Farmer said dwindling stocks from people keeping the jackets when they left the school over the years meant that jackets had to become exclusively for varsity athletes.

“Slowly but surely, we've been losing more and more of them to a point where we've only now been able to hand them up to varsity



Karina Medvedeva ('23) plays varsity volleyball and Dara Hejazi ('23) plays varsity soccer. Photo by Elena Alexander

athletes,” Farmer said. “We had to draw the line somewhere.”

Farmer said there is a new order of jackets with a new design being shipped to the School and the plan for these jackets – who they will go to and if there will be different prints for different sports or different sport levels – is still unclear.

Purpose

Farmer said the point of distributing sports jackets in the first place was to provide comfort and utility to athletes in the face of London weather, as well as to create a uniform look for athletes.

“We wanted a standard look that all ASL athletes would wear together and feel a part of a group, part of a team, part of a school and represent us accordingly,” Farmer said.

Pros

Stathopoulos, one of this year's varsity boys soccer captains, said the jacket inspired him when he was a JJV athlete and represented his goal of becoming a varsity athlete.

“When I was younger, like as a freshman, I would look up to some people on the team who would wear those jackets and be like, ‘I want to be on the team but I also want to be wearing what they're wearing because it signifies that I'm on the team,’” Stathopoulos said.

Having attended the school since Grade 4, Stathopoulos also said the

Volleyball	Soccer	Field Hockey	Cross Country
Total participants: 57	Total participants: 108	Total participants: 21	Total participants: 23
Number varsity: 24	Number varsity: 38	Number varsity: 21	Number varsity: 23
Percent varsity: 42%	Percent varsity: 35%	Percent varsity: 100%	Percent varsity: 100%

Satistics from Doreen Murphy

jacket comes with a sense of pride to represent the school that has been his home for over eight years.

“Being able to say that I made this team and I'm able to wear this jacket to represent my school at the highest level of whatever sport I'm playing is very important to me,” Stathopoulos said.

Layla Khatiblou ('25) said she first got the jacket when she was a freshman for varsity girls basketball, after being in JV girls volleyball the previous season. She is now on varsity girls' volleyball.

Khatiblou said she feels proud when she wears the jacket as it is a symbol of her hard work and she also feels motivation to continue to improve.

Outside of personal connection to the jacket, Khatiblou also said the jacket represents a commitment to the team through the act of the whole team wearing it and the energy varsity athletes put into their teams.

Stathopoulos said the jacket is a visible link that fosters connectivity within sports teams.

“When you have the jacket, you feel like you're more part of the team,” Stathopoulos said. “Our tradition before a game is we all walk out and leave the locker room together with our jackets on. And when we all take our jackets off, we all say ‘jackets off’ and we all take them off. So we all look the same when we're warming up to show the other team and to show whoever's watching that we're a team, we're unified.”

Regarding the role of jackets in the wider community, Khatiblou said wearing the jackets are an informal way to advertise games and send a message about someone's passions. She said wearing the jacket has led to peers to ask her about her sport.

“It kind of tells people a little bit about yourself almost in a way without you having to say anything,” Khatiblou said.

Implications

Sabina Peterson Rajalingham ('25) first received the varsity jacket in the fall season of her Grade 9 year for the varsity girls' soccer team.

Peterson Rajalingham said initially, the jackets did not hold any particular significance for her. Now in Grade 10, however, Peterson Rajalingham said she has “mixed feelings” about the jacket because of who gets it and who does not.

“I think the fact that only varsity players get to wear them is not super inclusive to like other sports players or even people who don't play sports,” Peterson Rajalingham said.

Claire Corley ('23) said she has not felt personal negative impacts from varsity jackets in the school, but she said she “very strong feelings” about the potential harm of varsity jackets because of her experience prior to ASL in an Arizona public school.

“It's just, like, previous experience that makes me a little wary of what can develop from the concept of varsity jackets,” Corley said.

Corley said varsity jackets can cause division within a school by age – as varsity athletes are usually older – participation in sports and sports level.

“I think that it furthers any cliques, I guess you could say, or any separation of people based on sports just within the community itself,” Corley said. “And then within athletes, I think it kind of separates those into people who are good enough people who are not good enough and kind of takes away from what I think should be the actual meaning behind high school sports and like objectifies the entire situation.”

Corley said the purpose of high school sports should be to “build and community and teach leadership” and varsity jackets defy that purpose.

“I think that varsity jackets, not only ... enforce a stratified sense of leadership and superiority among athletes, but split up a community that sports are intended to build,” Corley said. “Sports should be a uniting factor and I think that when you add a factor into it that is designed to separate out those who aren't good enough, I think that completely defeats the purpose.”

Corley said putting material value to varsity sports through jackets looks down upon effort people put into hobbies that are not athletic-related.

“I think it also discredits students who put in the same amount of effort that sports players do into academic roles and academic positions,” Corley said.

Peterson Rajalingham said the jackets serve as a status symbol because everyone recognizes them as a varsity jacket, perpetuating a divide between varsity and non-varsity athletes.

“Wearing a jacket is something that you can

see and immediately think like, ‘Oh, they're a varsity athlete,’” Peterson Rajalingham said. “And I think that in people's minds, I think that makes their status elevated.”

Peterson Rajalingham said representing the school at the highest level of a sport does not need to be a public statement.

“It does symbolize that you are the best of the best athletes in the high school,” she said. “But I'm not sure if that's like necessary to recognize through a piece of clothing.”

Peterson Rajalingham said the school-representation aspect of the jacket makes it unfair that non-varsity athletes do not get the jackets as JV athletes should also get the chance to represent the school.

Based on her JV experience, Khatiblou said “it's a little disappointing” that JV teams don't get the jacket, as those teams miss out on an opportunity to be more connected. She said that extra connectivity from having a jacket would help JV teams to feel more purpose.

“You're not less bonded, but you don't share something in the same way,” Khatiblou said. “Like, it's kind of cool if everyone together does something. I feel like sometimes on JV teams, that's not the case. Not everyone's as bonded or serious about it. So I feel like that's the only sad thing, and if people aren't serious, then it's kind of hard.”

Echoing Khatiblou, Farmer said he recognizes JV athletes miss out on a connecting link by not getting a jacket.

“We have plenty of non-varsity athletes who need an outer shell and outer layer, a warm layer beyond what they have,” he said. “And so what it means is ... a JV player would wear his or her own stuff basically, which means that the team doesn't look like a cohesive group that's all in a uniform together before the match starts.”

Next steps

Due to unpredictable London weather, Corley said she respects the school's desire to provide jackets to their athletes. She said, however, JV athletes should get jackets too because “JV is going to get as cold as varsity.”

Peterson Rajalingham said all athletes should have jackets to help close the status gap between varsity and non-varsity athletes.

Khatiblou also said JV teams should receive some extra piece of spirit wear to wear outside of games, jackets or not. She said there should be something for JV that is different from varsity.

“I think JV should get something because they're just equally as important,” Khatiblou said. “They're equally important teams, you know, [but] they don't get as much support and maybe we should support the JV teams more because a lot of those players a lot of the time later on will make a varsity team in coming years.”

Overall, Corley said having varsity-only jackets shows unbalanced priorities within a school.

“It kind of raises the question of ‘if we are going to objectify things and we are going to use material objects and material wealth to define what is successful, why don't we do that with performing arts? Why don't we do that with STEM? Why don't we do that to that same extent?’” Corley said. “And I think it kind of just shows not only what the school values but how, and how the school treats the difference between its academic students and its athletic students and where they feel those students' priorities lie.”

Takeaways

Farmer said it is not surprising the school's stocks of the jacket have decreased so much over time because of how popular the jackets are.

“It's amazing how much people like them,” Farmer said. “I mean that, because I can't think of anything else that we have that stood the test of time the way those things have.”

Farmer said jackets like these foster excitement for the sports program.

“At the end of the day, what I want is people happy and fired up about what they're wearing and excited to be a part of the sports program and if what they're wearing adds to that then that's a benefit,” Farmer said.

Ultimately, Stathopoulos is another athlete who does not plan to return to the athletic room at the end of the sports season, varsity jacket in hand.

“I'm keeping mine, that's all I'm saying,” Stathopoulos said. “I don't mind if Mr. Farmer hears, I'll pay him the £80 and I'm keeping my jacket.”

“Being able represent my school at the highest level of sport is very important to me.”

- Pete Stathopoulos ('23)

“It tells people a little bit about yourself without you having to say anything.”

- Layla Khatiblou ('25)

“Varsity jackets split up a community sports are intended to build.”

- Claire Corley ('23)