

North High standout 'one in a million'

Carlton Littlejohn stays positive when it comes to promoting and playing Polars athletics.

By **MICHAEL RAND**, Star Tribune

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Carleton Littlejohn

Testimonials about high school athletes flow frequently into the e-mail inboxes of prep writers. More often than not, the athlete in question has the same last name as the letter's author.

It's all the more reason to pay attention to random, unsolicited praise. And for the past year or so, we'd been hearing nothing but good things about Minneapolis North junior Carlton Littlejohn.

A lot of heart, we'd hear. Statistics don't tell the whole story. Indeed, Littlejohn is a talented athlete but perhaps not among the very best in the metro area. But he is a quietly determined young man who is helping to define and perhaps change the culture among Polars athletic programs.

"I wish every coach in America had a kid like this one," said Ricky Williams, an assistant AD and football coach at North. "He makes you love what you do."

When it comes to sports these days, Minneapolis North often gets caught in a numbers game. A long-term enrollment decline plays a role. Some potential athletes need to work or help take care of younger siblings. Others fizzle out and quit after initial enthusiasm wanes.

Littlejohn and a few of his closest friends are doing all they can, with each of them playing football in the fall, wrestling in the winter and hitting the baseball diamond in the spring. They also try to get other peers on board.

"I'm recruiting guys," he said. "They play football in their yards, and they brag about how good they are all the time. But there's a lot that aren't playing. ... It's the commitment part. They don't want to do it."

He paused, thinking ahead to his senior season of football.

"But if we can just get the guys we have to keep playing better," Littlejohn said, "we'll be all right."

The conversation usually drifts back to the positive side with Littlejohn, a starter at quarterback since his freshman year in football and a state meet qualifier last year in wrestling. Some might say he's shy, but North AD Jeffrey Buszta said "quiet" is a better word.

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