For a school of its size, Mercersburg Academy has always been a veritable melting pot of athletic opportunity. Any school that has produced 54 Olympians—men and women, from countries large and small, who have captured medals of all three hues in Olympiads held from Los Angeles to Barcelona and Antwerp to Helsinki—knows the importance of educating the body as well as the mind.

In July 1912, Ted Meredith, who had graduated from Mercersburg just weeks before, won two gold medals in track & field (then called simply “athletics”) at the 1912 Summer Olympics (formally the “Games of the V Olympiad”) in Stockholm. Meredith set world records in both events he won: the 800-meter run (1:51.9 seconds) and the 4x400-meter relay as one of the four members of the U.S. team (3:16.6).

That fall, after Meredith matriculated at the University of Pennsylvania, Mercersburg completed the Carl Lewis Nolde Memorial Gymnasium, which was described at its opening by the 
Mercersburg News as “one of the most beautiful as well as one of the best equipped gymnasiums in the world.” Some key components of the $120,000 building were the main “gymnasium room,” with its elevated track (still preserved today above the McDowell Fitness Center) and apparatus; a 75-foot by 30-foot swimming pool; two separate locker rooms for boys and faculty; fencing, boxing, and wrestling rooms; and six sets of shower baths.

More than 100 years and two major renovations later, Nolde continues to serve as the nerve center for the school’s athletic and physical-education programs. Surrounding the heart of the gym complex are the Plantz Courts, the Kuhn Wrestling Center, the Davenport Squash Center, the Flanagan Pool, and the Davenport Squash Center, which is celebrating its 10th year in 2014. Athletic facilities at Mercersburg also include numerous playing fields, the 14-court Smoyer Tennis Center and Frantz Tennis Pavilion complex, and the Jimmy Curran Track, which rings the varsity football field is and named for one of the school’s most legendary coaches (and certainly one of its most memorable characters).

But make room.
Construction will begin in 2015 on the first of two crucial pieces to the school’s athletic puzzle: a 64,000-square-foot field house whose highlight is a 200-meter, competition-level indoor track with an infield for field events that can be converted for use as basketball or tennis courts or other practice or competition space. It will be located adjacent to the north end of Nolde on the former site of the Funkhouser Tennis Courts, which became a parking lot after the Smoyer Tennis Center was built in 2001. The field house is a key capital priority of Mercersburg’s Daring to Lead Campaign and has a total project cost of approximately $12 million.

“The field house will immeasurably enhance the athletic and physical-education experience for all our students,” Head of School Douglas Hale says. “It will bring Mercersburg into parity with the other member schools of the Mid-Atlantic Prep League and elevate our athletics program in the way that the Burgin Center elevated our performing and fine-arts program.”

Future plans call for the construction of an approximately 40,000-square-foot aquatic center with a 50-meter Olympic-size pool; a separate diving well featuring one-meter and three-meter boards; and other features. The aquatic center will adjoin the gymnasium on its east side.

Bowie Gridley Architects, which is based in Washington, D.C., is designing the field house and aquatic center. The firm, which includes Bill Gridley ’69 as a principal, has previously worked with Mercersburg on the 2010 renovations to Nolde Gymnasium as well as design for the Smoyer Tennis Center, Davenport Squash Center, faculty housing, and on two campus master plans.

“The field house will elevate our athletics program in the way that the Burgin Center elevated our performing and fine-arts program.”

—DOUGLAS HALE

The field house (left side of rendering) will be situated just north of Nolde Gymnasium
THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Curran, whose name adorns Mercersburg’s outdoor track, coached at Mercersburg for 51 years (1910 to 1961). His athletes—a group that encompassed 13 Olympians who won seven medals, including six of the 10 gold medals earned by Mercersburg athletes all-time—never had the benefit of an indoor facility, despite their regular appearances in the prestigious Millrose Games at New York City’s Madison Square Garden and a track record of indoor and outdoor success rarely equaled by any high-school program. Instead, his athletes shoveled snow off the old wooden track to clear it before practice. (Though Blue Storm athletes have a modern rubberized outdoor surface for competition and workouts today, they must still do their fair share of winter shoveling in order to run on a track.)

“The new venue and the areas associated with it will give us the opportunity to really celebrate our track & field heritage and our history,” says Rick Hendrickson, Mercersburg’s director of athletics. “The 29 Penn Relays plaques will go back up. The banners from as far back as the early 1900s will go back up. The graphics will reflect the changing nature that was Mercersburg and is Mercersburg today. Our track & field history really is one of the most illustrious of any school, and it’s certainly one of the most accomplished of our programs.”

Track & field is also the school’s largest athletic program in terms of numbers; the indoor team includes approximately 80 athletes. Yet it has never had an actual indoor home—and setting up hurdles in the hallways of Nolde, which the team sometimes must do (carefully) in order to prepare for meets, doesn’t count.

“As a team, the indoor program really is
both an attraction and a destination for runners—those who will run in the outdoor season in the spring—as well as a large number of crossover athletes,” Hendrickson says. “We have softball players who run hurdles in the winter. We have football players who run sprints. We have baseball players who throw the shot put. This team has a real diversity to it, and it’s about a 50-50 split between boys and girls. And they will certainly be at the top of the list to benefit from the new building.”

On a rainy or snowy day, the school’s in-season athletic teams must practice inside (if, in the case of outdoor teams, they even get to practice at all because of limited indoor space in Nolde Gymnasium). During the fall and spring seasons, the only squads that compete indoors are the volleyball and club swimming teams; the rest are forced to alter their practice routines in the event of inclement weather.

“As soon as the ground freezes outside, it really becomes impossible to practice the field events—long jump, triple jump, and some of the skill events,” says David Grady, who is entering his 11th year as Mercersburg’s head indoor track & field coach and has coached track & field and/or cross country at the school in some capacity since 1995. “Being able to have regular practice will be a huge help. In a lot of the technical skill events, it will be a significant gain for our program. And that extends to the runners—we may have a particular workout planned one day and then we get snow and we have to adjust the plan. We’ve been pretty good at adjusting, but this will allow us to have a more reliable practice schedule for our athletes and to do what’s most beneficial for them.”

With its 200-meter, competition-size track, the field house will allow Mercersburg to host indoor meets—both high-school competitions and even potentially USA Track & Field indoor age-group events. Given the relative lack of indoor facilities in the immediate region, this could translate into a somewhat reduced travel schedule for Mercersburg athletes.

“You just don’t find many places with six-lane, 200-meter indoor tracks within range of us, which is why we end up traveling so much,” Grady says. “And many other schools are in the same boat, so a lot of the indoor meets we compete in are very large in terms of the number of teams that compete, and there’s a lot of waiting around once you get there. On a typical meet day, we leave early in the morning, we’re gone all day, and we get home in the late
evening. Sometimes that means our athletes are traveling two and a half hours to run 55 meters. It’s a different meet experience than you would have at a home meet, to say the least.”

Even the programs that will not receive new competition space from the field house’s construction will benefit. Take the school’s boys’ and girls’ basketball programs, for instance. The Plantz Courts, which were completed during the 1967–1968 school year and honor former athletic director Leonard Plantz, have served Mercersburg well as competition and practice space and will continue to do so. But Mercersburg has five basketball teams (varsity and junior-varsity squads for both boys and girls, plus a ninth-grade boys’ team) and just three courts. The space is also used for volleyball practices and matches in the fall and sometimes for wrestling matches in the winter. During inclement weather, the space is frequently pressed into service as a football or even a baseball, softball, or lacrosse practice venue. Naturally, the types of workouts for those sports that can take place in an enclosed space with walls and hardwood floors are minimal (even with the use of special balls that minimize the degree of impact with harder surfaces).

“The programming we are offering, in terms of both athletics and physical fitness, is bursting at the seams right now,” Hendrickson says. “Because of this, we are sometimes having to use some of our facilities for sports and activities that they were not designed to accommodate. Having the field house at our disposal will eliminate many of these problems and may even allow us to expand our programming.

“Inside the field house, we could have a track team practicing and also have either two basketball teams or four to eight tennis players working out [on the courts inside the track]—at the same time. We’ll have batting cages for baseball or softball. Of course, you can’t hold every one of these activities all at once, but the beauty of this building is that we will be able to configure it in whatever manner we need to on a given day.”

“We know firsthand that this will be a game changer for the students and the athletic department in terms of training, practice, and overall student health and well-being.”

—DYLAN LISSETTE
MAKING IT POSSIBLE

This spring, Mercersburg’s Board of Regents voted to approve construction for the field house. *Daring to Lead* Campaign co-chairs John Prentiss ’65 and Deborah Simon ’74 announced at the Board’s May meeting that Regent Stacie Rice Lissette ’85 and her husband, Dylan, have contributed a lead gift toward the building’s construction. The gift, when combined with other commitments, brings the total raised for the field house to more than $10 million.

“We are very excited about Mercersburg’s commitment to building this field house,” Dylan Lissette says. “We know firsthand that this will be a game changer for the students and the athletic department in terms of training, practice, and overall student health and well-being.”

The Lissette family has deep roots both at Mercersburg and in the school’s athletic program. Stacie Rice Lissette played field hockey and squash as a student at the Academy, and was also a manager for the varsity baseball team. The couple’s two oldest children, twins Payton ‘14 and Max ‘14, graduated from the school in May; Payton (who attends the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) was a member of the Blue Storm’s girls’ soccer, basketball, and lacrosse teams, while Max (now a freshman at Wake Forest University) competed in football, golf, boys’ basketball, soccer, and lacrosse during his four years at Mercersburg. Alex ’17 is in his second year at the school and plays soccer, basketball, and lacrosse. The two youngest Lissette siblings, Caleb and Colin, hope to one day follow in those footsteps on campus.

“Mercersburg transformed me and gave me a great foundation,” Stacie Rice Lissette says. “The impact that Mercersburg had—my four years there—were the difference in my education and personal growth.”
INTO THE (NEW) POOL
To the east of Nolde Gymnasium will rise the school’s aquatic center, an approximately 40,000-square-foot facility that will house a much-anticipated and long-awaited addition to Mercersburg’s athletic portfolio—a 50-meter, Olympic-size pool.

The 16 most recent Olympians from Mercersburg have been swimmers, including gold medalists Melvin Stewart ’88 (who won two golds and a bronze in 1992) and Rich Saeger ’82 (a gold in 1984) and Betsy Mitchell ’83 (a gold and two silvers, in 1984 and 1988). Over the years, Mercersburg teams have captured more than 20 Eastern Interscholastic Swimming & Diving Championships, most recently when the Blue Storm boys finished first in 2010.

Legendary coaches “King” John Miller, John Trembley, and Pete Williams are among those to have patrolled previous and current Mercersburg pools. The 25-yard Flanagan Pool, the current home of the Blue Storm swimming and diving programs, has been in use since 1968 and is named in memory of James Manley Flanagan ’36. (At the time of the current pool’s completion, Mercersburg was still a single-sex school.)

The new pool will employ a system of movable bulkheads that transform the full 50-meter distance into two separate 25-yard pools separated by a bulkhead. This means Mercersburg swimmers will potentially have the opportunity to train at multiple distances in the same day, which is important because Mercersburg fields both a high-school team (in the winter) and a USA Swimming-affiliated club program (during the entire academic year).

“It will allow our swimmers to train as USA Swimming long-course swimmers, which will serve us well with highly competitive swimmers and also international swimmers,” Hendrickson says. “During the high-school season, we could have kids training at 50 meters two or three mornings a week, and then they could train at the 25-yard distance in the afternoons. Remember that Michael Phelps, for instance, never swam for his high-school team—he competed only for his USS club.

“And the 50-meter size gives us the flexibility to offer literally three separate activities at the same time that serve the broader school community. The competitive swim team can practice, the diving team can practice, and the wrestling team can be at the other end of the pool doing hydrotherapy or a recovery workout. Water workouts can be recovery-oriented or resistance-oriented. Our coaches are already employing water workouts when possible, and this will give them greater flexibility and more varied opportunities. It would also make it easier for us to offer, for example, kayak-training sessions for outdoor education or lifeguard training and swimming-improvement classes.”
when The doors open all together, the new field house (approximately 64,000 square feet) and aquatic center (40,000 square feet) will be almost exactly equal to the size of Nolde Gymnasium (which is roughly 104,000 square feet). The field house is the first step and will take approximately 12 to 16 months to complete once construction begins.

“From a competitive standpoint, having this facility will give us the opportunity to host the types of teams that are already traveling to meets in Morgantown, West Virginia, or State College,” says Nikki Walker, who is Mercersburg’s physical-education department head and is also the school’s head girls’ outdoor track & field coach. “Just having an impressive facility like this on campus will make an impression on those that come to visit here as competitors or spectators. Things like that leave lasting impressions on people.”

“These are facilities that will be unequaled in the Mid-Atlantic Prep League.”

—RICK HENDRICKSON

WHEN THE DOORS OPEN

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“These are facilities that will be unequaled in the MAPL,” Hendrickson says. “And we’re not building these buildings just for the indoor track & field team and swimmers. We’re building them to encompass the full realm of athletic and personal fitness we offer here. Both facilities will be used by so many different teams and so many individuals.”

A look inside the aquatic center (note: final exterior design may vary)