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## *Remembering a vibrant and caring young athlete*



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

**Huddled in prayer**, members of the St. Joseph's Prep alumni rugby team 428 West begin their memorial fund-raiser in Fairmount Park.

# A lively cheer for No. 8

By Kristen A. Graham  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Because they were Josias Sterling's friends, they formed a line and slung their arms around each others' shoulders. Some shivered in the bitter breeze.

They were the members of 428 West, a rugby team from the St. Joseph's Prep Class of 2008. They share inside jokes, stories about tournament weekends, and a deep sense of loss.

In July, player No. 8 — Josias A. Sterling, 19, a boisterous, happy Temple University sophomore — died in Ocean City, N.J., when a powerful rip current pulled him out to sea. He had been standing in knee-



**Josias A. Sterling**, player No. 8, drowned in July.

deep water tossing a football with Ryan Gregory, a teammate and best friend.

Yesterday, the friends gathered for the Josias A. Sterling Memorial Apple Pie Sevens Rugby Tournament. Bill Gregory, Ryan Gregory's father and Sterling's coach at the Prep, addressed the more than 250 people who stood on the playing field in Fairmount Park.

"Today, we're going to celebrate his life, have a happy day, and smash each other in the face," Bill Gregory said, earning smiles and cheers from the crowd of rugby players and enthusiasts.

See **STERLING** on B7



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

**A benediction** by the Rev. George W. Bur, president of St. Joseph's Prep, opened the whimsically titled Josias A. Sterling Memorial Apple Pie Sevens Rugby Tournament.



# Sterling

Continued from B1

The tournament's name is a nod to Sterling's favorite dessert, which he was famous for downing on road trips. The trophies awarded to yesterday's winners — a college division made up of a Temple team of current players and alumni, and a high school division, West Shore United — featured an apple and a picture of pie.

"There's not a diner in the tri-state area that we haven't hit and he cleaned out of apple pie," said Bill Gregory, now the coach of the University of Scranton's rugby team. "We'd joke, 'We're coming. Get the apple pies ready.'"

The name given to the gathering was silly, but the emotions were genuine. Before the first match, 428 West — named for the address of a Shore house the young men shared the summer before they all left for college — stood on the sidelines and talked about their missing brother.

"He was a goofball," said Nolan Grady, laughing.

"He was loud, energetic, always ran hard, never gave up on anything," said Tyler Dewechter.

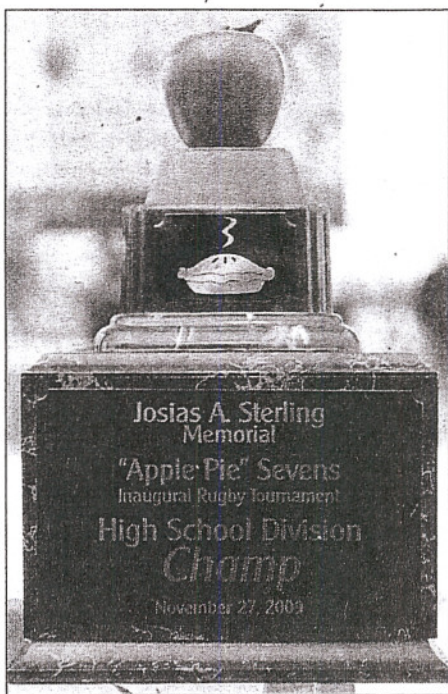
Sterling was a chicken-legged rascal, the young men added. And his arms? Always in constant motion, windmills blocking his opponents.

He laughed often. No one ever saw him angry, and his happiness wasn't an in-your-face kind of thing. Sterling was just at peace with who he was, they said.

"I try to think of him every time I go out on the field, to play the way he played," said Dewechter, a student at the Coast Guard Academy who now has a haiku Sterling wrote tattooed on his leg:

*Little Flower Smile,  
The Horizon Has Promise,  
No One Can Stop You.*

428 West's jerseys arrived the weekend Sterling died. He never got to wear that No. 8. But the others do, stitching that number and his initials onto their sleeves or scrawling them onto the medical



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

tape they use to wrap injuries.

Sterling would have loved the day, never mind the chilly weather, his teammates said. Last year, he played in the annual Prep rugby alumni game, now held in the morning before the Sterling tournament.

"If he was here, he'd be pumping up the team," Ryan Gregory said. "He was such a character."

Sterling could not swim, and the water was so rough that rescue boats had trouble negotiating it.

So now, part of the money raised by the Josias A. Sterling Memorial Fund — including roughly \$5,000 raised at the tournament — will go to a program to teach inner-city children how to swim. The rest will go to a scholarship to be given to a St. Joseph's Preparatory School rugby player who attends Temple.

The son of Haitian immigrants, Sterling studied communications and advertising at Temple and was named rookie of the year after his freshman rugby season.

On the field, he was pure energy, said his Temple coach, John Sciotto. And if Sciotto was running a tough practice, Sterling knew how to lighten things.

"I'd be giving the guys an earful, and I'd look over at him and he'd be grinning this big goofy grin," Sciotto said.

Perhaps Sterling's greatest gift was the way he cared for others, those who knew him well said.

"No human being was off-limits to his friendship," said Bill Gregory, who along with his wife, Angela, organized the tournament. "He would go out of his way at the Prep to invite some of the intimidated underclassmen to activities. He would engage folks who were naturally pushed to the outside."

Playing rugby feels different now, the coaches and players agreed.

"We tell our guys to play every game as if it could be your last," Sciotto said.

Said Gregory: "Every time I step onto the field to coach, I can feel him with me."

Organizing the tournament — which included a postgame party in Center City attended by Sterling's family — helped the heartache a little, he said.

"This isn't so much a sorrowful lamenting of his loss," Bill Gregory said. "His spirituality and goodness transcend the tragedy."

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For more information about the nonprofit Josias A. Sterling Foundation, go to [www.josiassterling.org](http://www.josiassterling.org)

**The apple pie trophy** reflects Josias Sterling's fondness for the dessert. "There's not a diner in the tri-state area that we haven't hit," his coach said. Funds from the benefit will be used to teach inner-city children to swim.