

# Learning Through

Katy area students build lifelong skills while competing in **ComedySportz** matches

*Written by Cherri Northcutt*

“If you don’t get it, you’re gonna’ get it, ‘cause here we go!” These are the words you will hear at the beginning of every ComedySportz High School League Match, right after a rapid-fire explanation of the rules of the game. Created in 1995, the ComedySportz Houston High School League now includes teams from all six Katy ISD high schools, as well as Faith West Academy. Improvisational comedy teams compete for laughs against other schools in matches throughout the academic year.

It’s fun, interactive, and clean comedy for all ages.

## Playing Games

Katy High School senior Zachary Gilliam remembers a game where teams tell a story that is alternately happy, then sad. The game is called “Boo, Yay,” and the audience will call out “boo” or “yay” after each line from the story. “Somebody from the yay side said the character won a million dollars,” Gilliam explains. “After everyone yelled out, ‘Yay,’ I looked down



# Laughter

at my feet, very sad, and simply said, 'Recession.' That got a big laugh."

Another favorite game among players is Pop-up Storybook, in which one player narrates the story while turning the imaginary pages of a giant pop-up book. The other three members of the team make up the characters in the book, striking a new awkward or unusual pose as each page is turned. JT Heilander, a junior at Faith West Academy, remembers one such game. "I was the polar opposite of what people expected," he says. "I acted like an exercise instructor reading a work-out manual." Heilander barked out instructions, while his team flexed their muscles and did push-ups.

"You would expect to see ripped dudes, but it was a bunch of skinny girls," Heilander recalls.

## Gearing up for Matches

It may seem impossible to practice for improv, but the ComedySportz teams actually do rehearse. There are 10 matches a year, and rehearsals take place during the week before each match. "Even though each show is different, it's important to practice and go through the games," says Gilliam.

"If I don't practice, I really mess up," says Morton Ranch sophomore Karina Rangel. "But you just shake it off and laugh about it." Danielle Grisko, a junior at Seven Lakes agrees. "Failing isn't a horrible catastrophe," she explains. "It's an opportunity to figure out what you did wrong and make it better for the future."



Members of the Katy High School ComedySportz team, from left to right: Hope Hardman, Ethan Sims, Star Yarbrough, Kylie Boone, Payton Trayhan, Taylor Dotson, Dani Northcutt, David Vasquez, Coach Miguel Sanchez, Tyler Graber, Jeremy Martin, Andres Rusic, Zachary LaPlue, Jake Brown, Michael Casarez, Jessica Walden, and Chelsea Scott enjoy impromptu performances

## Supportive Coaches

None of this would be possible without the dedicated men and women who coach their teams and referee the matches, all of whom are members of the professional ComedySportz Houston troupe. "There's nothing more gratifying than helping kids who are shy or have stage fright to come out of their shells," shares Katy High coach Miguel Sanchez.

Mariel Yera-Smithwick, known as Coach May to her students at Morton Ranch, Seven Lakes, and Mayde Creek, encourages students to look out for one another and to use the "yes, and..." way of thinking in improv. Both of these lessons teach team work. "Too often, we're quick to negate or dismiss other people's ideas," May says, "I teach students to literally say, 'Yes,' to others and to build on their ideas."

Steph DeWaegeneer, a ComedySportz coach at Faith West Academy and Taylor, enjoys helping students explore their love of comedy. Before becoming a coach in Katy, she did professional improv with Second City, iO, and ComedySportz in Chicago. "I'm excited to share my knowledge and get involved with the future of improv comedy," says DeWaegeneer.

## Lessons That Last a Lifetime

Dianah Dulaney, owner of ComedySportz Houston, enjoys seeing students have more confidence and self-esteem because of the program. "Our goals with the high school league are to build trust and creative experimentation in a safe environment and to expose students to improvisational skills that they will use in all walks of life."

Linda Peavy, a parent volunteer at Katy High, has seen many students make positive growth through improv. "It helps them gain self-esteem and be creative," she says. Taylor student Connor Woods adds, "It's really helped me with school work, like making great presentations and thinking quickly."

Kathryn Gilliam, president of Katy High's theater arts booster club, feels the lessons learned in ComedySportz will help students be successful after high school, as well. "The ability to think on their feet will serve them well as they go out into the world and interview for colleges, scholarships, and jobs," she says.

## Making Funny Friends

Many students find that they make new friends easily through the program. "Whenever we meet someone who has also been in ComedySportz, we are instant friends," says Morton Ranch sophomore Mary Elders.

Logan Beckham, a junior at Faith West Academy, says he will definitely continue with ComedySportz. "It was awesome being with the team," he recalls. "It helped me be more outgoing and open myself up to others." **KM**



*CHERRI NORTHCUTT is proud of her daughter, Dani, a member of Katy High School's ComedySportz team.*

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