A wide-angle photograph of a synthetic turf soccer field. Two soccer goals with white frames and black nets are positioned on the field. The field is marked with various colored lines: red, yellow, and blue. In the background, there are bare trees and a building under a clear blue sky.

On the night of Sunday, February 26, 2006, while playing basketball in a church gymnasium, junior John Taylor Babbitt '07 collapsed from a rare heart condition at age 16. Now, the Pingry community is honoring his memory by dedicating the new synthetic turf field as

The John Taylor Babbitt '07 Memorial Field

[THE HISTORY OF PINGRY ATHLETICS]

JoAnne and David Babbitt, the parents of John Taylor Babbitt '07, describe their late son in a simple sentence that speaks volumes: “he was a gentle soul who cared about people and loved sports.” They do not mean that he loved sports as an all-star athlete—they mean that he loved to be part of a team, loved to understand sports, loved to watch sports, and loved to talk about sports. He had this passion from the age of four.

In the 1990s, when his family lived in the United Kingdom, John and his father had season tickets for the Southampton Football Team (the U.K.’s version of soccer) and went to games every Saturday. After his family moved back to the United States, John became a huge fan of the New York Yankees and thrived on analy-

sis. “When we were watching Yankee games on television, he would call my father and discuss the merits of the umpire’s decisions. He knew all the nuances of baseball and other sports. It was really fun to see the passion and to see him get excited about it,” Mr. Babbitt says.

John was an active participant in Pingry athletics: his freshman year, he played on the junior varsity soccer and baseball teams; as a sophomore, he played on the junior varsity soccer and basketball teams and varsity baseball team; in his junior year, he played on the varsity football team.

“He loved nothing more than being on a team. Whether it was supporting from the bench or whether it was running on the field, he just loved the camaraderie,” Mrs. Babbitt says.

He also was an active member of his church’s youth ministry. John played basketball on Sunday nights as part of his church’s youth ministry league for high school boys and girls. On that Sunday night in 2006, he was playing at St. Patrick’s Church in Chatham when he collapsed from an undiagnosed case of Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy (HCM), an abnormal thickening of the heart muscle. HCM results in smaller heart chambers, which makes it difficult for the heart to receive oxygen; this condition is the leading cause of sudden cardiac death in young athletes.

Within days of his passing, Logan Bartlett '06 and another student asked students and faculty members for their favorite memories of John—interviews preserved on DVD—and their recollections reflect several aspects of his personality: he did not

try to be anyone else, he made people feel happy, everyone liked him, he was everyone’s favorite player on a team, and he was one of the only students who, every morning, greeted the nighttime security guard.

“[John and I] played football together and I would give him rides home from school frequently after practice. Following John’s passing, I saw the opportunity to help his family cope with the loss of their son,” Logan says about producing the DVD.

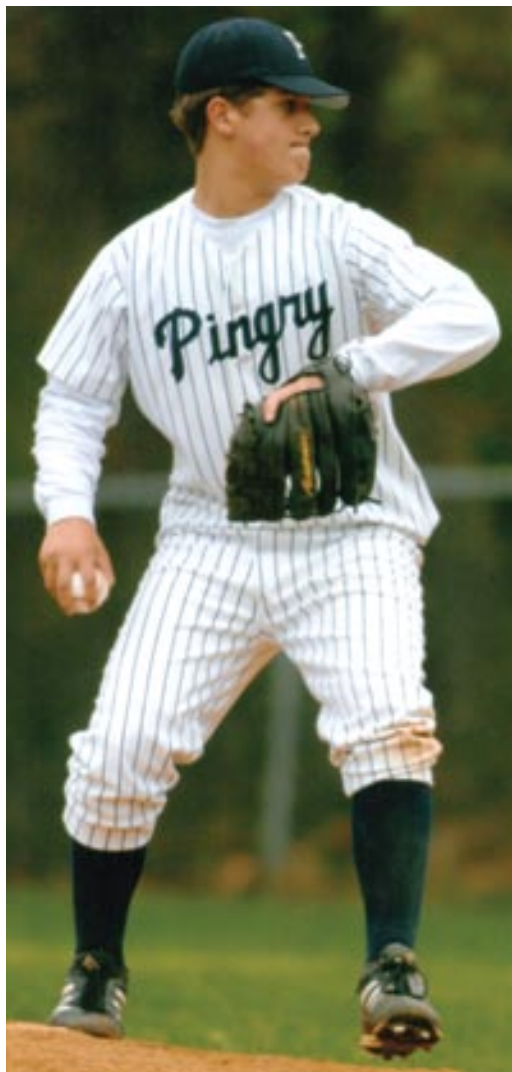
Two months after he died, Pingry’s varsity baseball team retired his No. 8 jersey and unveiled a dedicational plaque commemorating his life; the plaque is permanently affixed to a stone near the baseball field.

In addition to the plaque, four other initiatives have been undertaken to honor John’s memory. The first is the John Taylor Babbitt Foundation (www.jtbfoundation.org), a not-for-profit organization founded by Mr. and Mrs. Babbitt and John’s younger brother Andrew (VI) and dedicated to preventing sudden cardiac death. The foundation’s goals include installing defibrillators in schools, athletic venues, and public gathering places; funding research on genetic cardiac disorders; and sponsoring local training programs in CPR and AEDs.

The second is the “Walk with Heart Walk-a-Thon,” organized by John’s classmates and held each May at Pingry to raise money for the foundation.

The third is The John Taylor Babbitt '07 Memorial Award at Pingry, a fund that provides a prize to the winner of this award. It is presented annually to a senior boy or girl who most embodies the qualities that exemplified John’s life: fun-loving, confident, faithful, compassionate, reliable, and devoted to friends and family.

The fourth, completed this fall and dedicated at Homecoming on September 27, is The John Taylor Babbitt '07 Memorial Field, Pingry’s



John Taylor Babbitt '07 in 2005



The family of John Taylor Babbitt '07 at the field dedication. From left: grandfather John, brother Andrew '09, father David, and mother JoAnne, with Headmaster Nat Conard

first synthetic turf field, measuring 93,000 square feet. This field not only memorializes John, but also serves as an outstanding athletic facility that Pingry has wanted for many years, and the building and naming of the field happened simultaneously—the Board of Trustees granted permission to fundraise for the field at the same time that Pingry was considering opportunities to name something after John.

“Some of my first memories consisted of John and me playing sports in our backyard in England. Whether it was cricket, soccer, or the occasional baseball, John was always in his element playing sports,” Andrew Babbitt said during the dedication.

Three sets of parents whose children were John’s classmates volunteered to raise money for the project: Randy and Leigh Porges (Anna ’07), Wes and MM Lang (Emily ’07), and Richard and LeeAnne Lan (Austin ’07 and Elizabeth ’07). “He was a fixture in our home as my son Austin’s best friend. The weekend before he died, he and Austin went to Bucknell University to

visit my older son Travis. John had a wonderful sense of humor and lived life to the fullest,” Mr. Lan says.

These parents, like many faculty and staff members at Pingry, felt strongly that the school needed a synthetic turf field for two major reasons. Rain has forced teams to cancel practices and games, resulting in make-up games during busier periods later in the season. “We have wonderful [athletic] facilities, but, if they’re not available, that doesn’t help us in terms of providing first-class facilities,” Mr. Porges says. Synthetic turf will drain, allowing students to be on the field in the rain, so teams will gain a lot of playing time.

Also, Pingry’s teams have had to practice in the gym when it rains. “Most schools we compete against have turf fields and you have to be able to practice on it,” Mr. Lang says.

Lacrosse coach Mike Webster and field hockey coach Judy Lee, whose teams will use the field most of the time, say that improved technology makes synthetic turf fields safer.

For example, the sub-surface used to be asphalt, but, now, there is a cushion and the surface is softer, so the synthetic turf can turn with the player’s foot as his or her body rotates. Mrs. Lee also points out that synthetic turf helps her players as they follow the bouncing ball. “It’s a ‘balls on the ground’ game. This should allow for predictability and no irregular bounces,” she says.

Mr. and Mrs. Babbitt emphasize how grateful and appreciative they are for all of the support they have received from the Pingry community, and the naming of the field in John’s name means a lot to them. “John would be so honored, proud, and grateful to know that there are going to be so many kids who will have the opportunity to give sports a try, and to know that he’s a part of that,” Mrs. Babbitt says.

In Mr. Babbitt’s words, “There is no better way to memorialize John because he loved to be on a sports field. That is where he was the happiest.” ♡