



Coming off the Sidelines: Special Olympians score soccer team, support

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It's been a longtime goal.

The NorthStar premier girls soccer league has brought soccer to Northern Michigan Special Olympians.

NorthStar coach Jim Furstenberg said he had been hoping to do for years.

"We wanted to bring a beautiful sport to beautiful people," said Furstenberg, who is also NorthStar's director of the newly created Special Olympics soccer program. "It's something that's been in my heart for seven years now, and as a soccer club we had always wanted to be involved in Special Olympics."

NorthStar players are required to serve the community as part of their involvement in the club. This seemed like the perfect opportunity, said Furstenberg.

"We use soccer to reinforce life lessons," he said. "And part of those lessons is giving back."

Last summer, three teams of older players stayed after their regular practices once or twice a week to train the Olympians.

"It was invaluable what NorthStar players learned," said Furstenberg.

Allison Shrift, a sophomore at Traverse City West High School, enjoyed not only coaching the other players, but getting to know them as well.

"It was so much fun," she said. "They were always happy and really positive and tried their hardest at every game."

Player Mallory Litwiller echoed her teammate's sentiments.

"I would help again in a heartbeat," said the freshman at Traverse City West Junior High. "It was a big eye opener in a personal way. I saw that what we worry about isn't important to them.

"It also definitely made me feel better inside helping someone learn to do what I love so much."

The program evolved from a collaboration between the NorthStar and Special Olympics parents and coaches, local businesses and other organizations. Furstenberg said they wanted to keep it free of charge for the Special Olympians, and it is.

"We had one parent singlehandedly raise over \$2,000 to get these athletes uniforms," he said.

Traverse Bay Area Youth Soccer donated the use of the fields and Just For Kicks indoor facilities. Sundance Soccer sold the equipment at cost, he added.

"It's really been a 'community of the sport,'" Furstenberg added.

Although Special Olympians often participate in local sports, they don't typically have an organization like NorthStar take them under their wing, explained Fred Hoxie, who is member of the Area 2 management team for Special Olympics.

"That's been really nice," he said.

Nearly two dozen athletes participated in the outdoor play last summer. Eighteen to 20 players regularly attended practices and games, said Hoxie, who co-chairs the Special Olympics soccer program with Susan Bulger. Players here also hosted a team from Roscommon and took a road trip to Roscommon as well.

The players have now resumed training. They're playing and practicing with NorthStar players indoors at Just for Kicks during a six-week session.

Hoxie said the Special Olympians develop stamina while learning some new skills. But what they have liked most is the time they spend with everyone else.

"They really enjoyed the interaction with other athletes," said Hoxie. "It's as much social as anything, they like meeting new people."

As their skills as a team improve, plans are to have them attend some state team events.

For more information or to make a donation, visit www.northstarsoccer.org/SpecialOlympicMain.asp.

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Photos



NorthStar soccer players Joy Thomas and Allison Shrift, Special Olympics soccer players Samantha Robinson and Katie Sonnemann and NorthStar player Jessi Heger talk before a team scrimmage at Just For Kicks. Record-Eagle



From left, Special Olympics soccer players Brittany Raetz, Chris Opridge and Samantha Robinson scrimmage during a practice at Just For Kicks in Traverse City. Record-Eagle



NorthStar soccer players and coaches run a practice for a Special Olympics soccer team at Just For Kicks. Winter practice has just begun for the team, which has about 20 members, but full games won-t be played until summer. Record-Eagle