



Kerri Skotnicki, Brandon Ionta and Jenna Romano bonded thanks to District 204's Unified Soccer.

Soccer and friendship for all

It's a typical scene at any high school: athletes greeting teammates in the hallway the day after a big game. But in Indian Prairie School District 204 in the western suburbs, those teens bonding over sports are Special Olympics athletes and peer partners who play together in unified soccer.

District 204 is the pilot site for the unified soccer program in Illinois. The district, which includes Nequa Valley, Waubensie Valley and Metea Valley High Schools, already has extensive Special Olympics programming, including adapted physical education classes.



"(Unified soccer) really does match up to our programming in the schools because adapted P.E. classes are basically unified sports," says Joy Pierson Nebergall, the Special Olympics coordinator for the district. "They participate together in P.E., so it's just a natural fit for us."

The unified soccer program brings together people with and without intellectual disabilities—four Special Olympics athletes and three or four partners—on one co-ed team.

Liam Meza, 14, a freshman Special Olympics athlete, played unified soccer last fall. His favorite parts included wearing a sweat headband, winning a certificate and being a "star" of the team—especially when he scored his first goal.

"I really liked it," he says with a grin.

But beyond gaining new athletic skills, his mom, Cindy, saw

CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

Sports are a great unifier

Friendships, self-esteem bloom through local groups

When a child has special needs, sometimes it's tough to find an area where he can shine. Dave Shimanek and his wife, Patricia, felt that way about their son Jacob, 15, so they set out to find all the different things he could do instead of focusing on the things he couldn't.

One area that worked for Jacob is sports, especially golf.

Opportunities abound in the Chicago area to get kids with special needs involved in sports, from special recreation programs designed specifically for their needs, to private gyms and play-focused therapy, to Special Olympics.

Here is a look at two programs that are succeeding in getting kids outside, active and making friends.

SOCCER from page 27

him grow in self-esteem and confidence, and form relationships with his teammates.

"They genuinely care about each other and cheer for each other," she says. "It gives them the chance to be together."

That sentiment is echoed by the peers who play and coach alongside the Special Olympics athletes.

Alli Thomas, 16, whose older brother has special needs, says unified soccer lives up to its name off the field.

"I think a lot of times, we're so separate, even in school," she says. "We don't get to interact. Some people are afraid to go talk to (kids with special needs). But they're just like us."

That's what inspired the unified sports program in the first place.

"I think the beauty of it is that it's bridging any gaps between Joe Student in the hallway (and) someone with intellectual disabilities, and not being able to strike up a conversation," Nebergall says. "They have that common sports bridge. They're finding the commonalities of their lives, rather than the differences."

Unified sports, which also include basketball, volleyball and track, are part of the Special Olympics program, "Project UNIFY,"



Teammates from the Unified Soccer program huddle before a game. The program brings together kids with and without special needs.

which uses sports to foster respect, dignity and advocacy for people with intellectual disabilities within the school setting.

"There's a higher level of acceptance," says Ryan Sunderman, 18, who has worked with Project UNIFY for a couple of years. "You say hi in the hall. There are people to

sit with at lunch. We're breaking through the barrier."

The growth of the unified soccer program seems guaranteed. Special Olympics Illinois is already figuring out how to expand the program beyond District 204.

Elizabeth Diffin