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Souderton Area Unified Sports teams help build bonds

Bocce team wraps up inaugural season with trip to state finals

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FRANCONIA >> Souderton Area High School 11th-grader Karly Ditlow says she has played a lot of basketball.

“I like shooting baskets,” she said.

Bocce was a new game for her, though, before she played it as part of the school’s Unified Sports bocce team, which just completed its first season with a third-place finish in its division in the state finals in Hershey Friday, March 24.

“Special Olympics Unified Sports is a fast-growing initiative that brings people with and without intellectual disabilities together on the

same team to compete,” according to Special Olympics information.

More than 1.2 million people worldwide take part in Unified Sports activities, “breaking down stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities in a really fun way,” the information says.

“It was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding,” Special Olympics said.

This year’s SAHS Unified Sports bocce team had 16 members, including special needs athletes and their partners, said Cathy Ragusa, the team’s coach and a special education teacher at the school.

Some of the partnerships involved students who had known each other previously, she said.

“Some have gotten acquainted just through playing bocce,” Ragusa said.

One of the goals for next year is to again qualify to go to the state finals, she said.

“They all want to go back,” Ragusa said. “They really liked it.”

Eleventh-grader Candace Alderfer enthusiastically answered, “Yeah” when asked if she wants to be on the bocce team again next year. The response was the same to the question of wanting to return to the state finals.

Alderfer said she liked “throwing the ball,” which Ragusa said Alderfer and some of the other team members were able to do with the help of a modified bowling ramp.

The team had practices twice a week from December through February, during which time it had three meets, she said.

Bryan Fagan, a family and consumer science teacher who coaches the school’s Unified Sports track and field team, which just started its practices, said the team had 28 members last year, its first year, and has grown to 44

this year. This year's team has 15 Special Olympics athletes and 29 partners, he said.

There are six schools in Montgomery County with unified track and field teams, three more than last year, he said.

The track and field team competes in 100-meter, 400-meter and 800-meter individual running events and 4-by-100 and 4-by-400 relays, he said.

"For the field events, we do shot put, the javelin and the long jump," Fagan said.

Fagan said he expects this year's season to include at least four meets.

Mike Feliciani and John Donahue, who coach the school's track and field team, are also a big help and support for the Unified Sports track and field team, Fagan said.

"We practice side by side with the track teams," Fagan said.

Team members from the track team assist when the Unified Sports team has home matches, he said.

During the matches, the team members compete in divisions consisting of other athletes who perform at their same level, he said.

"We're really excited for the upcoming season," said Fagan, who said the Unified Sports program has received good support from district administrators.

Senior Emily Kramer, one of the partners in the bocce and track and field Unified Sports programs, said she plans to major in special education in college, has been part of the high school's Partners program for two years and interns each school day with the life skills class at Oak Ridge Elementary School.

In the Partners program, she helps out in the life skills classes at the high school, she said.

Being in the Unified Sports program was fun, as well as having allowed her to learn more about the life skills students outside the classroom, she said.

Ditlow and Alderfer said they were part of both the Unified Sports bocce and track and field teams. Both are also in the school musical, "The Music Man," running 7 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday, March 30 through April 1, and 2 p.m. Sunday, April 2.

Alderfer, who said her favorite part of track and field is running, said, along with being in school plays, some of the other things she likes to do are to walk and to stock the chips in the school cafeteria, which she does as part of the life skills class.

Ditlow, who said she likes to cheer on her teammates, said running was her favorite part of track and field.

Performing in shows is another favorite thing, she said.

"I like to sing and I like to dance ballet," Ditlow said. "I like acting."

That's all part of the school programs, Ragusa said.

"We have a lot of opportunities for people to get together and bond," she said.