

DS/USA: Mentoring Through Sports Benefits All

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Youth Sports Mentoring Program Manager

Chapters of Disabled Sports USA (DS/USA) do a lot more than just provide sports and recreation opportunities to individuals living with disabilities.

With the dedicated help of their invaluable volunteers, these organizations also provide their participants with hope, inspiration, guidance and the opportunity to make new friends for life! The DS/USA Youth Sports Mentoring Program provides the evidence.

For an example, San Diego Adaptive Sports Foundation (SDASF) started its participation in the DS/USA Youth Sports Mentoring Program during the summer of 2008. Through SDASF's year-round mentoring program, youth with disabilities have the opportunity to establish a strong, personal connection with trustworthy and dedicated volunteers through sports. This program requires its participants to maintain contact a minimum of once every month (telephone, e-mail, or personal contact) as the mentors are encouraged to attend their mentee's sports practices, games, or tournaments.

Here is 14-year-old Patrick Ivison's story on how he benefits from his participation in SDASF Mentor-Mentee Sports Program:

"When I was a little kid, I was hit by a car and suffered a spinal cord injury. Through the years, I have always been looking up to people older than me who have injuries, trying to see how they manage to do stuff independently. Now that I am a teenager and in high school I definitely do not want Mom cruising around with me everywhere, so more than ever I am looking to figure stuff out. Well, there is one man in particular who has helped me more than I think even he knows. His name is Dan McCauley. He has been in a chair for over 20 years and if I have any question on how to do something or adapt it to make it work he either immediately has an answer or he will find one.... he is a great guy and an awesome mentor."

Patrick's mentor, Dan McCauley, explains why he chose to participate in SDASF's mentoring program:

"I volunteered to be a mentor to hopefully help make a positive impact on a young athlete's life. Working with Patrick has been a great experience and the positive impact has been a two-way street. Our relationship started out on the wheelchair rugby court at the San Diego Adaptive Sports Foundation's Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp. Coaching Patrick on the rugby court was a pleasure as he was eager to learn the game. Off the court, I got the chance to learn what a great person Patrick is and to share experiences and goals. I'm not sure about Patrick's goal to show me how to surf, but then again the program is just starting and this is California."

SDASF is one of several DS/USA chapters throughout the country that have initiated a formal mentoring component through the DS/USA Youth Sports Mentoring Program.

Huggins Hospital Adaptive Sports, located in Wolfeboro, N.H., is another chapter that has recently started its own youth sports mentoring program. The Huggins Hospital Adaptive Sports Youth Mentoring Program recruits students from Brewster Academy and other local high schools to mentor children with special needs through a variety of already existing sport and recreation programs offered at Huggins Hospital Adaptive Sports.

"Clearly all parties benefit from youth sports mentoring," said Jennifer Fraser, program director of Huggins Hospital Adaptive Sports. "Our mentees gain from the attention, the socialization, and the enriched activity while our mentors gain from engaging in morally relevant conduct as they make a contribution to society. Simply put, the smiles are contagious and we all feel better by being a part of such a wonderful program."

While many DS/USA chapters have initiated year-round and seasonal mentoring programs, others have dabbled with event

Photo courtesy of Huggins Hospital Adaptive Sports



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mentoring during their Wounded Warrior Disabled Sports Project (WWDSP) events.

One recent example is STRIDE Adaptive Sports, located in Rensselaer, N.Y. In mid-September, 2008, STRIDE Adaptive Sports launched a unique mentorship opportunity between STRIDE Youth Athletes and Wounded Warriors who spent a weekend camping together at Moreau Lake State Park in Gansevoort, N.Y. More than 30 people participated in the weekend's events, which included whitewater rafting, kayaking, hiking, a scenic train ride and singing songs around the campfire.

One of the STRIDE Youth Athletes who participated in this mentoring event was Mollie McEvilly, 15, who tackled whitewater rafting with her mentor, Jacob Martin, 29, during the Wounded Warrior Fall Family Retreat. Throughout the action-packed weekend, a strong bond developed between Mollie and Jacob as neither one thought twice about leaping over the side of the raft into the chilly Indian River when given the opportunity! The success of the event has helped persuade Jacob to join STRIDE as a volunteer instructor this winter where he and Mollie plan to get together again soon.

Having nearly 300 volunteers trained to mentor a young person with a disability through sports, the DS/USA Youth Sports Mentoring Program has only scraped the tip of the iceberg with its mission to provide greater opportunities for youth with disabilities to develop self-confidence, independence and a healthier, more physically active lifestyle.

As the DS/USA Youth Sports Mentoring Program continues to grow, more and more people are realizing that sports and recreation opportunities do provide many more benefits than what most people realize.

For more information about the DS/USA Youth Sports Mentoring Program, visit www.dsusa.org.



Photo courtesy of All McKee

Mollie McEvilly, left, with her mentor, Jacob Martin, during STRIDE's Wounded Warrior Fall Family Retreat.