

Sports and Recreation Activities For Fun and Healthy Lifestyles

By Kristin Stenhagen



Besides being just plain fun, participating in recreational activities and being physically active can improve overall health and physical functioning. Sadly, according to Holly Tiller of the Virginia Department of Health, “people with disabilities are less likely to be physically active than those without disabilities” and are also “more prone to secondary conditions,” such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol or weight gain.

To expand recreational opportunities for Virginians with disabilities, a new task force known as the Health Promotion for People With Disabilities (HPPD) Project was created in 2002 with a grant award from the Centers for Disease Control. The HPPD's main goal is to promote healthy lifestyles for people with disabilities. They plan to address topics that include health promotion and education, as well as prevention of secondary conditions, and in doing so will help build opportunities for participation in recreational and social activities. According to Tiller, who is the HPPD's acting project manager, they plan to work with community partners to make sure those with disabilities can participate in recreational programs that already exist and that these types of programs are held at accessible locations. Already leading the charge are several national and Virginia-based recreational programs featuring sports and activities that can promote physical skill building, improve functioning, and provide opportunities for teamwork and fun. A few options are profiled below. With continued growth and organized support for increased possibilities, 2006 is a great time for your child, teen or young adult to get involved.

Challenger Little League

The Challenger Division is Little League's® program for children and teens ages 5-18 with intellectual and physical disabilities. Through practices, games, and help from “buddies” who provide training, guidance and physical support as needed, the program encourages all to enjoy the benefits of Little League® participation in an athletic environment structured to their abilities.

Challenger teams generally have 15-20 players who participate in one of three levels: Tee Ball, Coach-Pitch and Player-Pitch. The spring season typically starts in

early April and runs through mid-June.

More than 27,000 children played in the Challenger Division in 2004 on more than 1,800 teams in the United States, Canada and several other countries. This May, Norfolk, Va., will be the host site for the first Challenger Little League Baseball World Jamboree which is expected to draw between 200 and 300 teams from the United States and 60 other nations.

Currently 120 Challenger teams exist in Virginia and, according to Andrew Adler, president of the Virginia Beach Little League® program, it is the fastest growing division in Little League® baseball. To find a team in your area, go to www.eteamz.com/vastateLL for contact information for the District Administrator for your area. The cost to participate in the Challenger Program varies by league from no charge to approximately \$25 per player.

The Challenged Sports Exchange

Expanded two years ago from a t-ball program, the Challenged Sports Exchange program of Lynchburg Parks and Recreation now offers a variety of sport and recreational options throughout the year for individuals with mental and/or physical challenges. Activities are adapted to individual needs and generally offered Tuesday and Thursday evenings. For those over age 10, basketball, beach ball volleyball, bowling, indoor croquet, golf, soccer, tennis and water aerobics are available. Programs for fishing and t-ball/softball are open to those as young as age 5. High school age participants can earn varsity letters and pins for basketball, tennis and baseball participation.

In addition to sports, other activities include craft classes, nature programs, a sign language class and a hand bell ensemble choir, offered by a grant from Virginia's Very Special Arts. Starting in January they will also host a monthly Family Movie Night. More than 250 individuals from ages 5-70 participated in the Challenged Sports Exchange program last year.

Minimal fees vary by program; a non-profit Advisory Committee raises funds to support activities and awards. A quarterly newsletter provides program updates and registration information. To join the mailing list, contact Barbara Franz at 434-455-5880 or write Lynchburg Parks

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and outdoor play. In 2005, more than 300 children participated in Virginia's TOPSoccer programs. According to Dave Williams, TOPSoccer Chair, the TOPSoccer mission is "to initiate, grow and sustain as many individual TOPSoccer Programs in VYSA-affiliated soccer clubs and associations as is possible in order to include as many children with special needs as we can to provide the most wonderful, meaningful and FUN soccer experience."

To find a program in your area, call Dave Williams at (703) 207-0517 (home) or (202) 564-8179 (work) or visit www.vysa.com/programs/34617/index_E.html. There is a low fee for participation which varies by club.

Therapeutic Horseback Riding

The Therapeutic Riding Association of Virginia, Inc. (TRAV) is a not-for-profit organization formed in 1986 to foster the concepts of therapeutic horsemanship for people with disabilities.

Presently, there are 20 member centers in Virginia, all of which are also member operating centers of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), certifying their instructors through NARHA and complying with accreditation standards and procedures. In addition to encouraging program growth, ensuring safety regulations are met, and educating the community about the benefits of therapeutic riding, the mission of TRAV centers on furthering the medical, therapeutic, recreational and social stimulation derived through horseback riding for people with disabilities. For a brochure and a listing of member centers visit www.travinc.org or call 703-508-7046.

UniqueKids, Inc.

The Central Virginia-based program UniqueKids, Inc. offers after-school programs that combine social skills training, physical education and behavioral self-management for children and adolescents, ages 5-18, with autism, Asperger syndrome or pervasive developmental disorders. Activities include arena kickball, basketball and soccer as well as a theatre group and survivor course. "One of the most important things we teach is how to experience team relationships and how to work together," says Tim Holt, UniqueKids, Inc. President.

Both specialists and volunteers (including adults with Asperger syndrome) serve as coaches. During practice sessions and games, they help participants develop physical and social skills while incorporating the concept of sports vision training, which is geared to help improve focus both on and off the field.

UniqueKids, Inc. was started in 2003 by Holt, who has a background in sports vision training and coaching; Staci Carr, a specialist in autism spectrum disorders and social skills training; and a parent with a special interest in this area. Approximately 100 children and adolescents participate annually. Camps, group training and workshops are also offered. For more information visit www.uniquekids.net, call 804-739-9875 or email info@uniquekids.net. Programs vary by season and are offered in spring, summer, fall and winter sessions. Cost for participation varies by sport or activity.

To learn more about Virginia's Health Promotion for People With Disabilities (HPPD) Project, visit www.vahealth.org/cdpc/disability/index.asp. The site describes the program and provides resources, links and information related to recreational activities. ■

A Spirited Competition: Ms. Wheelchair Virginia

Each year a woman from the commonwealth is selected to serve as the Ms. Wheelchair Virginia, Inc. ambassador to educate and advocate for individuals with physical disabilities by delivering messages of advocacy, public education, inclusion and inspiration at both leadership and local community levels in order to influence attitudinal, architectural and social change for all Virginians.

The Ms. Wheelchair Virginia ambassador is selected during a process that involves a table presentation, interviews, and speeches on what contestants hope to accomplish with the title. Contestants choose a motto and platform to speak about during the pageant and their reign. Contestants must be female, between the ages of 21 to 60, and have been Virginia residents for the past six months. They must also use a wheelchair 80 percent of the time, demonstrate effective communication skills, and be available to travel throughout the state as a representative for people with disabilities.

Angie Wilkerson, Ms. Wheelchair Virginia 2005-2006, chose the motto: Change begins with me. She describes the pageant as "a program that celebrates the inner beauty and accomplishments of women in a wheelchair. "It recognizes how they succeed in life despite obstacles," she says.

The individual selected as the state titleholder competes in the Ms. Wheelchair America pageant. For more information visit www.mswheelchairva.com. Note: Contestants must raise \$500 in sponsorship fees to cover registration, accommodations and meals.



and Recreation, Attn: Barbara Franz, 301 Grove Street, Lynchburg, VA, 24501.

Paralympic Games

The 22-sport Paralympic Games showcases talents of the world's most elite athletes with physical disabilities. It is the second largest sporting event in the world, conceding top honors only to the Olympics.

Today the Olympic-host nation also hosts the Paralympic Games. In recent years, more than 4,000 athletes from 120 countries participated in the Summer Paralympics and more than 1,100 athletes from 36 countries competed in the Winter Paralympics. Disability groups represented include athletes with amputations, blindness or visually impairments, cerebral palsy, or spinal cord injuries as well as those who use wheelchairs or are affected by conditions such as multiple sclerosis or dwarfism.

U.S. Paralympics is a division of the U.S. Olympic Committee that focuses efforts on enhancing programs, funding, and opportunities for persons with physical disabilities to participate in Paralympic sport. Their mission is to promote excellence in the lives of persons with physical disabilities. For information, visit www.usparalympics.org.

Rainbow Olympic Games

The Rainbow Olympic Games is a sporting event held annually in Richmond, Va., for children and adolescents from Virginia, ages 6-21, with medically diagnosed visual and/or physical disabilities. The two-day competition involves track and field events (bowling, club/softball throw, long jump, 60/200/800M races, shot-put, and wheelchair slalom) and swimming and rafting events. Competitors are classified based on level of disability and awards given based on performance within age group and classification.

This event was organized in 1981 by a group of physical and recreational therapists who wanted to give young people with disabilities the challenge of athletic competition. Since then as many as up to 100 athletes have participated in a given year. In 1992, Rainbow Games became a non-profit organization, relying on community and business contributions to continue offering the opportunity to participate at no cost. The organization hopes to continue to make the event a fun experience that builds positive self-esteem and lifetime friendships while encouraging young people with seasons and can involve indoor and outdoor play. In



disabilities to be as active as possible. For an application and more information, call (804)559-5782 or visit www.rainbowolympicgames.com

Special Olympics Virginia

Special Olympics is a year-round international program of sports training and athletic competition for children (age 8 and older) and adults with intellectual disabilities. Currently, the program serves almost 1.4 million athletes in more than 200 programs in more than 150 countries. Special Olympics Virginia is the state program of Special Olympics Incorporated.

More than 2,400 contests take place in the Commonwealth leading up to five annual state-level competitions. Overall, 22 sports are offered and 26 localities in Virginia have Special Olympics programs.

Special Olympics athletes are divided into divisions by age and ability level. Participants who finish first in their divisions are eligible to advance to state, national and international games. Special Olympics uses the term "Training for Life" to describe their programming which is geared to provide opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy, and participate in the sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with families, other athletes and the community. Through financial gifts and fundraising, Special Olympics is able to offer programs at no cost to athletes or families. To find a program in your area, a calendar of events and registration forms, visit www.specialolympicsva.org or call (800) 932-GOLD.

TOPSoccer

The Outreach Program for Soccer (TOPSoccer) involves community-based soccer training and team placement programs that bring the opportunity of learning and playing soccer to any child or teen, ages 4-19, who has a mental or physical disability. The Virginia Youth Soccer Association (VYSA), a state association of the United States Youth Soccer Program (USYSP), actively supports this concept with 20 TOPSoccer programs throughout the state.

Each soccer club manages its own program, which typically involves VYSA players partnering with a child to work on skills and provide guidance during regularly scheduled group practice sessions. Games are an option, depending on ability levels of participants, but the overall focus is on fun. Programs may be offered during spring, summer and winter