

Soccer club adapting recreation programs for kids with disabilities

An athletic program in Irondequoit is striving to make sports accessible for all children, regardless of ability or disability.

The Irondequoit Soccer Club is developing new ways to adapt its recreational programs for children with disabilities, including those who are hard of hearing, have Down syndrome or are on the autism spectrum. The efforts go well beyond just a welcoming smile and a pat on the back, and include policies and equipment changes that help ensure each player's success.

It begins at the pre-season practices.

Recreational soccer Vice President Josh Phillips explained that working on cross-motor patterns in the warmups helps children with disabilities gain stronger balance and coordination, essential for teaching them to use both feet during the game.

Some creative cues also help the players, Phillips said.

"We're beginning a new initiative with our 8-and-under program this season by using different color goals in each game. One goal will be white and one goal will be blue. This can provide a visual cue to help players quickly grasp direction in a game when they often find themselves not directly facing their target."

The program also tries to match players with coaches whose skills would be especially helpful. For example, one of the club's volunteer coaches also works with Rochester School for the Deaf modified soccer.

Marisa Howard's 9-year-old daughter, Gabby, who has Down syndrome, has been playing with the club for two years. She's not a very fast runner, so she was placed with a team of 6- to 8-year-old players. Phillips explained that the decision offered Gabby the best chance to succeed in a safe environment, where she's not overstimulated by players more adapted to the game.

The approach is working, at least for Gabby.

"It's made her definitely interested (in playing)," Howard said. "She still wants to do it, so that tells me a lot. Any time a child wants to stick with an activity, obviously it's been a good experience.

"It's just so cute to see their teamwork and to see all the kids just treat her the same."

Brook Baumgartner's son Sammy, who also has Down syndrome, has been playing with the club for three years. She believes that the program has benefited Sammy as much socially as physically.

"Socially the kids are great." Baumgartner said. "He's just like one of the kids. We have this wonderful video of him scoring last year and

everyone celebrating. It was just so amazing to have him be included and be part of it.”

“I think he’s proving to himself that he can do it and I think it’s given him confidence. He sees kids from school so it helps him to make connections with kids who aren’t necessarily in his classroom, and kids see him participating recreation-wise in the same way that they do.”

That’s pretty much what it’s all about, Phillips said.

“We believe (these efforts) will help players with disabilities find soccer as an important activity in their life, one that they look forward to continuing from season to season.”

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Josh Phillips, Irondequoit Soccer Club vice president for recreational soccer, huddles with Gabby Howard, center, and team Dynamo during halftime of their recent game.

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