

WASHOUGAL'S UNIFIED SPORTS CREATE CONNECTION, OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

Community Invited to Support Athletes with Disabilities

at May 14 District Championships

WASHOUGAL, Wash., May 11, 2022 – For Washougal parent Jennie Brown, Unified Sports is more than just an athletic activity, it's an opportunity for her daughter, Suzanne, to connect with others and hone her new skills.

“Suzanne is very performance-oriented,” Brown said. “Having an outlet for that is huge. This is how she relates to the world.”

Suzanne, a 17-year-old Washougal student with a disability, participates in cheerleading and Unified soccer at Washougal High School. Brown says the socialization opportunities that Unified Sports has provided for Suzanne have been a game-changer.

“Suzanne is non-verbal, so making friends has always been difficult,” Brown said. “Unified Sports gives her an opportunity to practice her emerging conversation skills. Her way of engaging with people is different. Athletics has been a great equalizer for her.”

Washougal School District is one of several Southwest Washington school districts with a robust Unified Sports program. The Unified Sports model combines Special Olympics athletes (individuals with disabilities that prevent typical athletic opportunities) and partners (individuals who participate in typical athletic opportunities) as teammates on sports teams for training and competition.

“Seeing Suzanne learn how to play soccer has been great. She has never been interested in kicking a ball and running around, and now she is happy doing both,” Brown commented. “She uses her cheerleading skills to support and encourage the other players.”

“This is so special for parents and students,” said David Williams, the Unified Sports program lead and a special education teacher at Washougal High. “For parents to see this opportunity for their child, is so meaningful and many have never seen their kids compete on a basketball court or soccer field.”

Suzanne, along with other Unified soccer players are prepping for their District IV Championship matches, which are set for Saturday, May 14, at Washougal High School's Fishback Stadium. The events start at 9 a.m. and last through the afternoon. The games are free and open to the public. Athletes from half a dozen Southwest Washington school districts are competing for a chance to move on to the state competition.

“The athletes get very excited before the matches,” said Williams. “Having people cheer athletes on is in our human nature to enjoy.”

As a special education teacher for seven years, Williams has seen firsthand the sometimes-limited extracurricular opportunities available to special education students.

“The excitement and enthusiasm felt during a match is something that many of our athletes haven’t felt before,” Williams said. “I’m grateful they can have this experience in our schools.”

Jodi Miner’s son Evan also participates in Unified Sports. “This is such a great opportunity for Evan to be socially and physically engaged with his peers,” she remarked. “I love seeing him feel successful and seeing him cheer others on. He absolutely loves Unified.”

While participation in Unified Sports program activities is a fulfilling opportunity for special education student-athletes, the unique rewards of the program are experienced by all participants.

“The magic is watching a general education varsity student-athlete who is not impacted by a disability to build relationships with a special education student-athlete,” Williams remarked. “For many of the general education students, it’s a realization of the opportunities they are presented with. This process creates awareness of the need for inclusion for all. It’s a beautiful thing.”

As a first-year coach, Williams says he is grateful for the strong support the Unified program has received from the Washougal School District and the previous Unified Sports program lead Dani Allen. The program has grown dramatically since it was founded 7 years ago.

Today, there are more than 40 participants in two program sports, basketball and soccer. The soccer program has 20 participants alone, which is enough for two teams. The Washougal Unified Sports received a grant from Special Olympics Washington to get uniforms and other supplies for this year, and they plan to apply for the grant again next year, in anticipation of continued program growth. The district has also invested in an additional coaching position to support ongoing Unified program work.

“Especially for a smaller school district, we have a high level of participation and support from the top down,” Williams said. “It’s very important to the community that all athletes get an opportunity to participate in athletics year-round. Washougal School District really wants this program to succeed.”

Williams hopes the positive momentum continues to build. He’d like to add more sports offerings and create a Unified Sports Student Leadership Group, with the goal of helping general education students get more involved.

“Unified Sports is a significant opportunity in the lives of many families, both for those living with and without disabilities,” Williams said. “We’re creating a more inclusive environment for all student-athletes and I am proud to be a part of this work in Washougal School District.”

“Kids with special needs communicate and relate to the world differently. But all kids' needs are the same,” Jennie Brown said. “Everyone wants to have friends. Everyone wants to be accepted. Everyone wants something they are good at. Those are universal needs. Unified Sports helps to achieve these things for special needs students and traditionally developing students, alike.”

To learn more about Washougal’s athletic programs, visit our website www.washougal.k12.wa.us.