

UNIFIED SPORTS

Proud To Call Each Other Teammates A SPECIAL BOND

By **MATT EAGAN**
meagan@courant.com

Ilene Mellman was sitting in the bleachers at Avon Old Farms School last week, watching her son Jeremy carry the torch that would start a unified soccer tournament.

"He has never stood up so straight in his life," she said to no one in particular.

Jeremy Mellman, who has Down syndrome, started playing Unified Sports as a freshman. Before he was part of a unified team, a normal day involved leaving Avon High School and heading home to play on his computer.

Athletics has changed all that.

"The first time he did it, he was beaming," Ilene Mellman said. "He thought it was the

COMBINED, B4

greatest thing. It's made him a lot more confident and self-assured."

The premise of Unified Sports, a program developed by Special Olympics International, is to unify athletes with intellectual disabilities (special athletes) and athletes without intellectual disabilities (special partners) on one team.

The CIAC began a Unified Sports program in 1992 with two tournaments. The program has grown to 32 tournaments and now involves 50 school systems and some 1,500 athletes playing four different sports. The sports offered are soccer, basketball, volleyball and track and field.

"This is what is right with the world," said Newington unified coach Seth Greenberg.

Connecticut was the first state to bring a Unified Sports program into the schools.

"We are very fortunate because we are in the forefront of the school-based unified sports movement," said Laurie-Jean Hannon, vice president of game sports development for Special Olympics Connecticut. "Unified Sports have been around since [the 1980s], but what is new are the school-based programs. That is becoming the focus of a lot

of states and we were the first to start the school-based programs."

Hannon said officials from the Connecticut Association of Schools are frequently asked to give presentations to other states on how to build a unified program.

The benefits for students such as Mellman, a senior, are obvious. For two afternoons each week, he engages in hard, physical activity while socializing and making friends.

For the partners, the benefits are every bit as real.

"Sometimes I think they are helping us more than we help them," said Elisabeth Beloin, a junior at Farmington High. "It doesn't matter what kind of day you've had when you step into the gym and you see a smile on an athlete's face or when they come and greet you. You become happy."

Each of the partners has a story to tell.

For Newington High's Jonathan Riddick, a senior running back and defensive tackle, it came during basketball season.

"We were trying to teach dribbling," Riddick said. "And all of a sudden he just hugged me. I'll never forget that."

The athletes also make memories.

Jon Davis, now an assistant coach with the Bristol Central team, remembers a moment from his days as a special athlete at that school.

"We are at a tournament and my special partner set me up on a breakaway," Davis said. "I scored it. I remember that."

Davis said his favorite part of coaching is seeing other special athletes have a similar moment.

"When an athlete scores a goal for the first time, that's a good feeling," Davis said. "You watch the reaction."

Newington athlete Taylor Rich didn't score during the tournament at Avon Old Farms, but she said it's important to keep playing.

"I like my special partners," she said. "With them I can do a sport I like, and I like soccer. I like all of it."

She said without the unified team she would be home playing on her computer.



What makes unified teams especially rewarding is when the social benefits go beyond practice and tournaments and spill into the school day.

“High school is a scary situation to come into for anyone,” said Farmington junior Marney Pollack. “This is a great way to tell them that we are unified as a team and that we are just like each other on so many levels.”



For an audio slide show of the unified soccer tournament, visit courant.com/unified.



MARK MIRKO | mmirko@courant.com

UNIFIED SPORTS help Kevin Meger, left, fit in with fellow Newington High students John Tancredi, center, and Jon Riddick.



MARK MIRKO | mmirko@courant.com

NICHOLAS POITRAS of Newington competes in a unified soccer tournament at Avon Old Farms. At left is “special partner” Jenny Marvin of Farmington High.