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A 'Special' Olympic Dream

NEW CANAAN — Eighth and ninth grade New Canaan Country School students, along with dozens of administrators, braved the biting temperatures last Wednesday to welcome more than 50 Special Olympians from across the state, including Norwalk.

Banners bearing the names of participating schools were hoisted into the air as Country School students cheered on the Special Olympians exiting their buses.

This is the fifth year County School has hosted the event, which is organized by the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference (CIAC) and the Special Olympics Unified Sports of Connecticut.

"My utmost gratitude is given to New Canaan Country School students," said Kate Careb, vice president of advancement, Special Olympics of Connecticut. "These students exemplify the meaning of leadership.

"They welcome our Special Olympic athletes with enthusiasm and engaged them throughout the afternoon with cheers, pats on the back and smiles. It is easy to see that New Canaan Country School students have a natural instinct to be kind leaders."

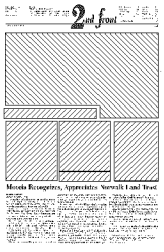
Tyler Giggi, a ninth-grader at Country School, who supported Special Olympians from John Wallace and Martin Kellogg Middle Schools in Newington during soccer games, said the experience was eye-opening.

Other Special Olympians, who participated in soccer, basketball and volleyball games during the event last Wednesday, were from Nathan Hale Middle School in Norwalk, Middlebrook Elementary School in Trumbull and Columbus Family Academy, John Martinez Elementary School and Katherine Brennan School, all in New Haven.

"Last year I had no experience working with Special Olympians, so I had all these preconceived notions about what it would be like, 'Would they be able to compete on the soccer field?' Would they be able to play a team sport?' " Giggi said. "When I saw the smiles on their faces and when I saw them competing so hard on the field, all of those questions were blown completely away. I was so proud of them."

Special Olympics Unified Sports is an initiative that combines equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes and athletes without physical or intellectual disabilities (called partners) on sports teams for training and competition. Including the event held at Country School, there are 28 other tournaments held in both the winter and spring.

Luke Rubin, a ninth-grader at Country School, was in awe as he watched one elementary school Special Olympian perform



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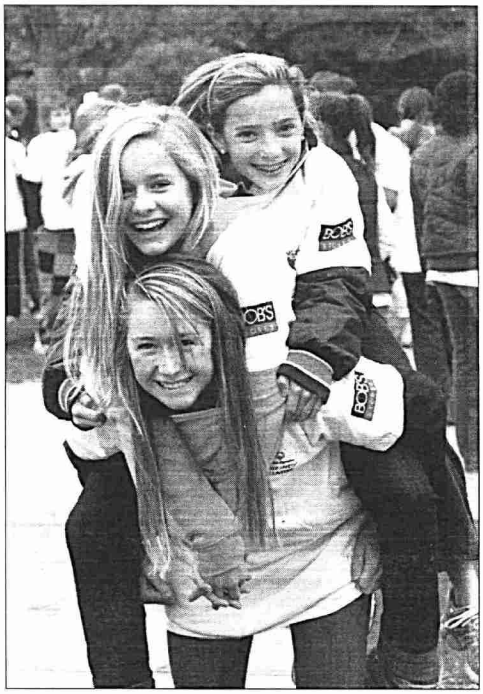
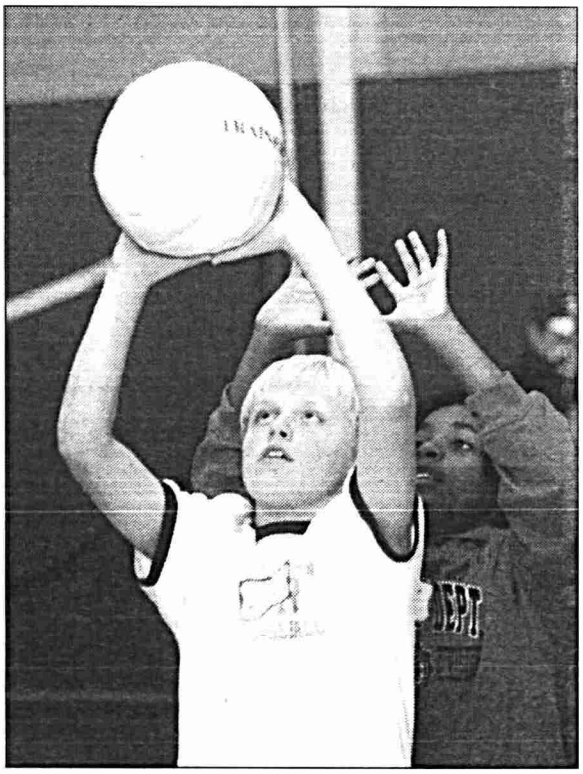
basketball drills and at one point slam dunk a basketball through a five-foot basketball hoop.

"The feeling of helping these kids is indescribable. I can't even put it into words," Rubin said.



Amy Mortensen / Staff photographer

Shawn Thompson is given a warm welcome by the New Canaan Country School at the Special Olympic event last Wednesday. Thompson represented Norwalk's Nathan Hale Middle School. To the right: New Canaan Country School student volunteers (from left) Katie Kelley, Kat Huber and Mettler Growney enjoy themselves during the competition. Below: Rowayton Elementary School student-partner Colby Scovel practices setting a volleyball while athlete Sabuwr Jones gets the feel for the motion. Each athlete was paired with a student-partner, who was a mainstream student from the school.



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