

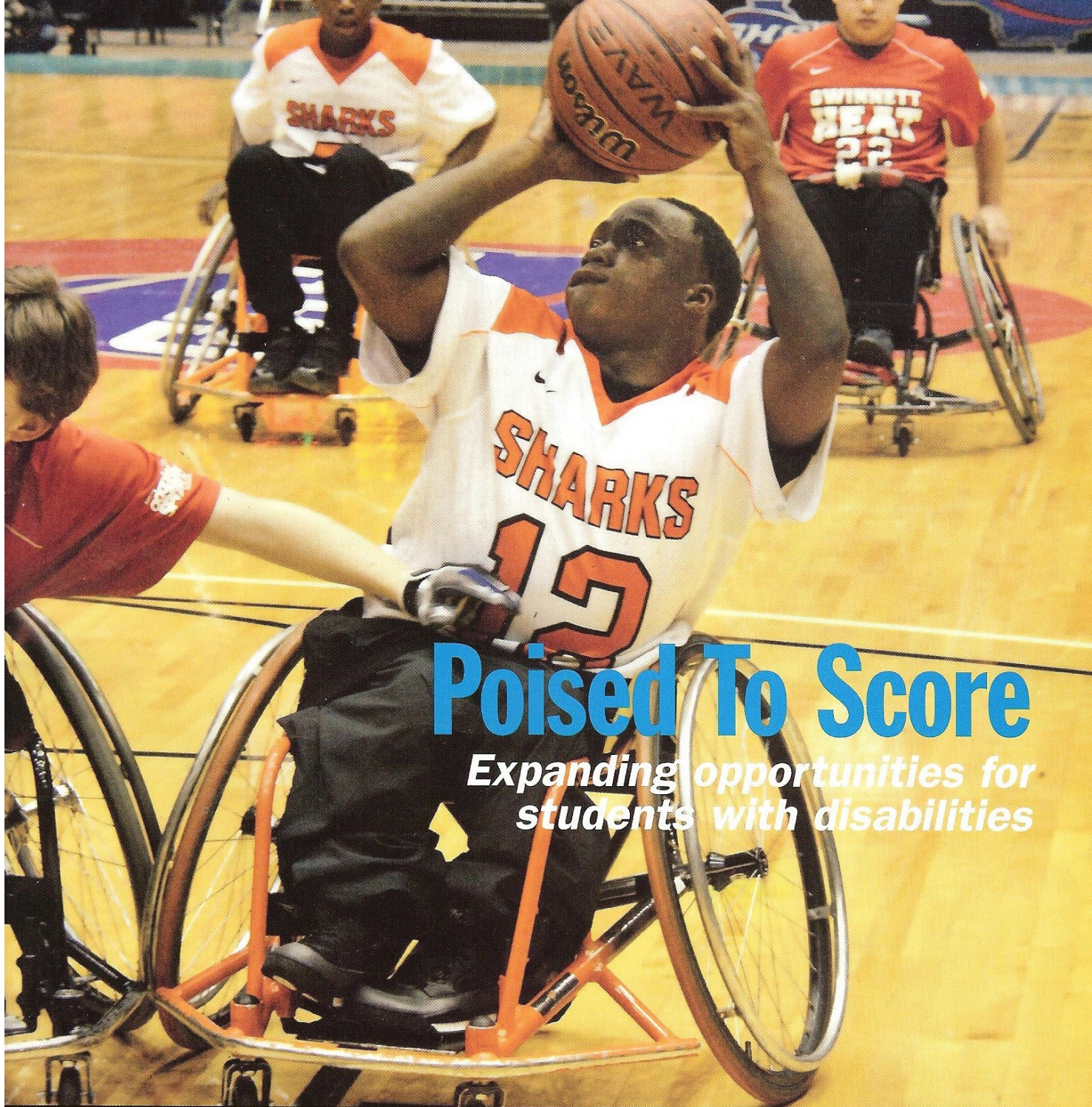
NFHS/NIAAA CONFERENCE PREVIEW

# Athletic Management

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## Poised To Score

*Expanding opportunities for students with disabilities*

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at West Haven (Conn.) High School, about starting a Unified Sports program at his school, he put her off. Athletic teams that paired students with intellectual disabilities with non-disabled athletes? It sounded like too much work.

"The first couple of times she called, I said, 'Yeah, I'll look into it,'" says Capone. "I thought she might go away. But she was persistent. She kept calling and calling until I finally invited her to talk. And I'm so happy I did. I went from not thinking about implementing it, to being the coordinator for the whole league—that's how much I enjoy the program."

When Capone got involved, there were only one or two other schools participating. Now all 16 public schools in his league have programs, many of which he's helped get off the ground.

At his school, the Unified Sports program usually includes about 20 students with disabilities and six to eight non-disabled students, typically off-season athletes, known as partners, who rotate in and out depending on the season. The school offers soccer, basketball, track and field, and bowling. Each sport has one or two practices a week, including scrimmages, and a couple of tournaments, many of which West Haven hosts.

The first piece of advice Capone relays to any school setting up a program is to think about transportation. Unified Sports practices at West Haven end at 3:30 p.m., and many parents can't pick up their child at that time. To make the program feasible, Capone has scheduled a bus run specifically for its participants.

"People don't often think about transportation, but it's a key factor," he says. "If you can get a bus lined up, everything else will fall into place."

Expenses for Unified Sports are minimal, and new programs can receive aid from Special Olympics for the first year or two. "After that you're basically on your own, but you fund it just like you would any other athletic team," says Capone. "It's not expensive—buses, some basic uniforms, and coaches. You could probably run the whole program for \$3,000 to \$4,000 a year. If you have \$5,000, you can have a first-class operation."

West Haven classifies Unified Sports coaches as club advisors for budget purposes, since the time commitment is not as great as with other sports teams. And coaches without experience can receive training from Special Olympics chapters in all 50

states. When hosting tournaments, Capone asks officials to volunteer their time, or he taps local college students to help out.

In addition to providing proper funding and staffing, creating a buzz has been important to the program's success. "There isn't anyone in our school who doesn't know about our Unified Sports program," says Capone. "The partners recruit the athletes with disabilities. The athletes wear the medals they've earned to school, and they're awarded letters just like the varsity athletes."

"It's probably the most satisfying thing I've done as an athletic director," he continues. "It's very fulfilling to see how happy it makes the athletes. They're having fun, mingling, making new friends, and connecting with the partners. And these kids go out of their way to say thank you."

#### ON THE RIGHT TRACK

When it comes to accommodating students with physical disabilities, adding events to existing sports, like swimming or track and field, would seem to be an easy way to boost inclusion. But controversy has cropped up in several states over how to set standards for and score these events.

The Mt. Tabor (N.C.) High School boys' track and field team found itself in the middle of a storm in 2014 when two wheelchair athletes, Ty Ruvolis and Marcus Lumamba, contributed eight points to help the team win the 4A state championship by a six-point margin. Because Ruvolis and Lumamba were the only athletes competing in their events—wheelchair discus throw and shot put for both students and 100 and 200 meter wheelchair races for Lumamba—some competing coaches said their points, and the team title, were not won fairly.

"Those coaches were a small but vocal minority," says Mt. Tabor Head Track and Field Coach and Health Teacher Patrick Cromwell. "Ninety-five percent of the people I came in contact with thought it was awesome. And our state association was adamant that they were not going to kick our athletes out or create a separate championship. I'm very grateful that they stuck behind their initiative to start this program."

The North Carolina High School Athletic Association has been allowing students with disabilities to compete and score team points in track and field since 2009, but initially, Mt. Tabor didn't have students

**A common stumbling block with adapted sports is having enough participants for competition.** That hurdle did not stop graduate student Matt Grigoreiff from founding Athletics for All at the University of California and establishing a goalball team.

Developed for blind athletes, goalball is played three-on-three, on a court divided into sections by raised lines that players can feel with their hands. The ball has noise bells inside it so athletes can hear it, and the goal spans the entire width of the court. At Cal, the program is open to students with and without disability, and all players wear blindfolds.

The team started with only one visually impaired student-athlete, but the numbers soon grew. "That one opportunity for that one student created a wave of change," says Grigoreiff. "Now there are six or seven players with impairments on the team. Two more universities have started programs, with others working to put teams together."

Cal's squad participated in the first-ever intercollegiate goalball tournament along with Portland State University and Slippery Rock University last March. Athletics for All is also launching an inclusive power chair soccer team and hopes to add a wheelchair basketball team soon.

While Athletics for All is housed outside the athletic department, it has received support from both Athletic Director Michael Williams and Chancellor Nicholas Dirks. "There have been gestures that are largely symbolic but still significant, such as giving our goalball team jerseys and recognizing the players at football games," says Grigoreiff. "When the Chancellor of the flagship school in the University of California system says we can do this, that's powerful."

IF YOU BUILD IT

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