

Pass It On®...

The First Victory is Being Part of a Team.

In a small Utah town, teams are built around including athletes of all physical and mental abilities. The result is an experience much deeper and more rewarding than just winning games.

Sports have always been a measure of physical and mental perfection. As the push to be the best accelerates, and college kids are paid wheelbarrows of money to play a game for our entertainment, the trickle-down is more intense pressure on the younger kids to achieve.

Competition leagues are more prevalent than ever. To some parents, it feels like the joy of the game has been replaced with the expectation to earn money.

“It’s as if we’ve forgotten how much fun sports are for kids,” one parent laments. “Fine for the kids who are gifted athletically and want to move on that path, but what about the rest of the kids?”

Enter the Unified Sports Program at Salem Hills High School in Central Utah. This is a sports league like no other. It’s not designed to move the best team to the top, or to reward the best players. The Unified Sports program is designed exclusively for inclusivity. It is part of the Special Olympics organization and “is aimed at promoting social inclusion through intentionally planned and implemented activities.” At Salem High School, it’s one of the most popular sports programs at the school and was recently recognized by ESPN Sports.

Each Unified athlete is paired with a student without intellectual or physical impairments to assist them with understanding the game and having a positive experience. It’s like every special athlete having a personal coach on the field with them at all times. And watching the game, it’s hard to tell who is having the most fun.

The games are also well attended by the student body, with every goal celebrated wildly. The experience has become bigger than the sport. The triumphant feeling of including all is much bigger than any other victory.

“Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt,” is the motto for Special Olympians and Unified athletes. For the students volunteering their time to pair up with a Unified athlete, the win is in the relationship. Students say they have never had so much fun in a game. Gone is the pressure to achieve, replaced by the depth of humanity we all share – the connection, the joy, the optimism for the future, when they realize anything really is possible if we all help each other out.

Sport can be a celebration of peak performance, but it is much richer when it celebrates the triumph of selflessness and the power of inclusion. It’s time to go back to the roots of why we participate in sports: To soar above competition to a better place, as only humans can.

Win At Life... PassItOn.com

By The Foundation for a Better Life®

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