

Embracing inclusion: Breaking barriers, celebrating abilities in hockey

By Jennifer Schwegman

I moved to the Valley from Saint Paul, Minnesota, six years ago. While living there, I was fortunate to experience some of the state's 11,842 lakes and vibrant sports culture. There are a lot of Minnesota sports teams to choose from - my husband is a devout Vikings fan - but I developed a deep love for hockey, and no team captured my heart quite like the Minnesota Wild. But then I moved to Phoenix and fell in love all over again. When first introduced to the Arizona team, I watched the players skate across the ice and was blown away by their physicality and sportsmanship. They were fierce competitors and determined athletes who encouraged teammates to bring their best. This team had something special and they were about to teach me a valuable lesson about inclusivity in sports.



The One Step Coyotes, an Arizona-based adaptive hockey team, comprises 34 players with varying degrees of disability and abilities. The athletes show up at AZ Ice Peoria every Tuesday and Thursday during the four-month season and skate their hearts out.

They are a force, and the people behind the program are part of a powerful movement promoting inclusivity that is reshaping the landscape of hockey. Like any other sport, hockey poses unique challenges for individuals with disabilities. However, adaptive equipment has made it possible for people with diverse abilities to participate actively. Adaptive equipment, including sleds and wheelchairs designed for the ice, skate walkers and specialized hockey sticks, have opened doors for participation and showcased the remarkable resilience and determination of individuals with disabilities.

I witnessed joy when a player with limited physical ability in a wheelchair scored a goal for their team. I observed true sportsmanship when a player skated off the ice after defeat and shared her happiness for the winning team, but ambition when I heard her strategize how she would put a player from the other team in the penalty box during the next match. Don't let the smiles fool you. These athletes want to win but recognize that winning isn't everything. Showing up and doing your best is what counts.



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I'm happy that hockey organizations and leagues have recognized the importance of inclusive programs catering to individuals with disabilities. These initiatives break down barriers and create a safe and supportive environment for everyone. Special hockey organizations, such as the American Special Hockey Association, provide program opportunities for individuals with cognitive and developmental disabilities to engage in hockey at their own pace. Programs like this help players develop skills, an appreciation for teamwork, and, most importantly, the joy of playing the game. By focusing on individual abilities rather than disabilities, these inclusive programs have been instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging and boosting self-confidence among participants. But I'm most excited about the fact that the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in hockey is not only reshaping the sport but also challenging societal perceptions. Athletes with disabilities have become powerful advocates, showcasing their talents and inspiring others to overcome barriers. Promoting inclusion in hockey goes hand in hand with educating the broader community about disabilities and breaking down stereotypes. And not only is it true on the ice, but off the ice as well. These individuals are being recognized and celebrated in sports, the workplace, on stage, in art galleries and as philanthropic members of their communities.

Organizations that provide comprehensive programs that empower individuals who have intellectual disabilities to be independent, effectively seek and maintain employment and achieve greater social participation in their communities are essential for the Valley community.



The athletes on the One Step Coyotes are a testament to what these individuals can do. They show up. They work hard. And they have joy in their heart when others see what they are capable of.

They want to be active members of the community, but they need our attention, support and commitment. They need us to be inclusive and break down barriers. By doing so, we not only enrich the lives of those with disabilities but also nurture a more diverse and vibrant community for all. Together, let us embrace the power of inclusion and celebrate the remarkable achievements of my favorite hockey team and individuals of every ability.

For more information about adaptive hockey, joining the team or how to support the One Step Coyotes, contact JaredWoosley@osbi.org