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Being a Robin allows students with disabilities a chance to compete, connect

For students with disabilities, school can be a difficult place to fit in, according to Marcus Onsum. Whether students have a physical or cognitive impairment, children and their families can sometimes feel left out of the school experience, he said.

Onsum would know – he has two siblings with muscular dystrophy, and witnessed firsthand their school experience when he was young.

“Even as children, all they ever really heard was ‘you can’t do this,’ or ‘you can’t do that,’ and it was all because of their disability,” he said.

Everything changed once his siblings began eighth and ninth grade. That’s when they were encouraged to play competitive sports for the first time – recruited to participate in Robinsdale Area Schools (Rdale) adapted athletics program.

“It meant everything to them – to our family,” Onsum said. The impact was so powerful that Onsum joined the program as an assistant coach just after he graduated from Armstrong High School (AHS) in 1994. Today he’s head coach of the physically impaired adapted teams.

“I’m so proud of Robbinsdale Area Schools and its adapted athletics program,” he said. “It’s why I’ve been a coach for nearly 30 years.”
The adapted athletics program in Rdale is a co-op, meaning both AHS and Cooper High School are part of the same team. The co-op also includes the Hopkins, St. Louis Park and Mound Westonka school districts. The team is known as the Robins, and has two squads – one in each division (cognitively impaired and physically impaired) – for three different competitive sports: soccer (fall), floor hockey (winter), and softball (spring). Students in grades seven through 12 can participate.

Lloyd Olson started the Rdale program in 1988, and the Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL) first sanctioned adapted sports as an official high school activity in 1992, around the time Onsum was watching his siblings play.

“Thanks to Lloyd, the district has a rich history when it comes to adapted athletics. Being a Robin is really powerful for our students and families,” Onsum said.

AHS senior Darius Larson has been a Robin since seventh grade, and is currently a member of the PI floor hockey team. He said being a part of the program has helped him engage and form a bond with his classmates, and get to know them in ways that might not have happened otherwise.

“Being a Robin makes people like me feel a part of something,” he said. “When you’re disabled you can feel cut off from the inner circle. It’s a little hard to engage with our classmates because we may look different, or we may have a cognitive disability. The Robins allows kids like me to play competitive sports just like our peers, so we’re more a part of that circle.”

Jayda Johnson, a junior at AHS, has also been a member of the team since middle school. She said her experience as a Robin has been incredible.

“When I first joined in middle school, I was very shy and quiet at the start. Soon I became talkative, confident and strong,” she said. “Being a student-athlete has made me grow as a person, and it’s very important because it provides me with socialization and skills development, as well as daily physical activity.”

Onsum said he believes schools having adapted programs is the ultimate measure of inclusivity.

“It’s important because we’re making a commitment by offering programs and opportunities for all students,” he said. “It’s an opportunity that doesn’t exist anywhere else, and it also comes with the benefit of allowing students to be seen by their grade-level community as a peer.”
And that is why he recruits all students and families to participate.

“High school athletics help students socially, academically and emotionally,” Onsum said. “There are also so many deep connections students and families make by being a part of an activity or athletic program. Especially this one. At bare minimum, it’s a life-enhancing experience.”

Learn more about the Robins and Rdale’s adapted athletics program by visiting robinsathletics.com. The website includes highlights of recent games.

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The mission of Robbinsdale Area Schools is to inspire and educate all learners to develop their unique potential and positively contribute to their community. Robbinsdale Area Schools serves approximately 12,000 students in seven communities in the northwest Twin Cities area, including Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Crystal, Golden Valley, New Hope, Plymouth and Robbinsdale. There are 11 elementary schools, four middle schools, two high schools, an alternative high school and a robust Community Education program that serves learners of all ages.