



In the Game

Adapted sports league gives students with disabilities an opportunity to compete and represent their schools

Shelby Anderson

They are like any other high school sporting event in Wisconsin. Students enthusiastically compete against neighboring high schools while parents, students and community members fill the stands and cheer their athletes on.

But the Mississippi Valley Conference Adapted Sports league is unique — it features student athletes with disabilities.

The league includes teams from La Crosse Central, La Crosse Logan, Onalaska and Holmen high schools. The teams compete in indoor soccer in the fall, indoor floor hockey in the winter and indoor whiffle ball in the spring.

The league started in 2012 when

Jim Cappuccio formed an indoor floor hockey team at Onalaska High School. La Crosse Central and La Crosse Logan established their teams the following year, followed by Holmen High School. Students in 9th through 12th grade who meet established league eligibility criteria compete on the area teams. The adapted sports league is an option for student athletes who, with or without modifications, cannot successfully or safely participate in the schools' existing extra-curricular sports.

The league is for physically disabled or cognitively delayed students as defined by local special education administration. The student athletes do not possess

the physical and/or cognitive ability that would allow them to compete fairly on a traditional school sports team.

According to Cappuccio, in the past, many of these students were falling through the cracks. They didn't have the opportunity to participate in high school team sports. Cappuccio wanted to give his students a chance to compete and be part of a team. When he started the league in 2012, he based it off of the adaptive sports program in Minnesota, which is one of the oldest and most recognized programs in the nation.

While the league in western Wisconsin hasn't reached that level yet, Cappuccio said other districts

The student athletes may have a disability, but they compete with the **same enthusiasm** as other high school athletes.





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have expressed interest in joining and at least one more area high school may be added for the next school year.

■ Getting started

To establish the adapted sports team at Onalaska High School, Cappuccio carefully worked on a detailed proposal and presented it to administrators and, eventually, the school board.

“The school board was very supportive,” he said. “At the time, this was kind of out-of-the-box thinking and they are very supportive of innovative thinking.”

Cappuccio approached other area high schools and encouraged them to form teams. La Crosse Central and La Crosse Logan followed suit in 2013 and then Holmen joined in as well. When approving the teams, the school boards didn’t need to adopt any

new policy or administrative rules. It simply required the school boards to approve the teams.

Each of the seasons last about eight to nine weeks. During that time, teams practice as often as four nights a week after school. Cappuccio said when he drafted the proposal for his team in Onalaska, he wanted to make it as close to a regular varsity sport as possible. Like other high school sports, athletes have to abide by a code of conduct, maintain a certain grade level, get physicals before the season, and participate in practice and

games. Athletes have the opportunity to letter in their sport just as other high school athletes. They are also recognized as student athletes at their high school’s seasonal sports award programs.

“My mission is to have it like a legitimate sport,” Cappuccio said.

Like any other sports team, the teams are funded through their



respective high school's extracurricular budget. The coaches said that the budget for their adapted sports teams is a relatively small percentage of the total extracurricular budget. The teams have also raised some of the funding on their own. When Nick Slusser approached the Holmen school board, he and his athletes had raised \$4,100 to help cover the initial costs. In addition, like any other high school sports team, the athletes participate in regular fundraising activities.

In La Crosse, the teams at Central and Logan high schools were approved after an in-depth proposal was submitted and reviewed by the administration and school board. Martha Tymeson, who, along with Matthew Meyers, coaches the team at La Crosse Central, said the administration was initially hesitant about establishing an adapted sports team, but after the first season, she says, they were 100

percent on board.

La Crosse School District Superintendent Randy Nelson says the time and resources devoted to the team are absolutely worth it.

"Our adapted sports league provides our students with commensurate supports in their journey to success," Nelson said. "To be recognized by fellow students, parents and the community brings a degree of equity to a program and group of our students who otherwise may navigate our schools unnoticed."

■ Teamwork and other benefits

The coaches at all four schools agree that students benefit from participating in the league.

"I've been in the La Crosse School District for more than 20 years and it's absolutely one of the best programs we have developed for kids with disabilities," Tymeson said.



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The students gain self-confidence, self-esteem, and friends while participating in a healthy activity. In addition, many students take on leadership roles on their teams.

“I’m watching these kids in special education assume roles as

leaders that they’ve never had an opportunity to do before,” Cappuccio said. “This gives them a chance to practice those skills.”

Jessa Pfennig, who coaches the La Crosse Logan team, along with Lisa Boyer, said that many of the

students come to the team without any experience participating on a team.

“At the beginning of the season, sometimes just getting along was a struggle, but by the end of the season they were a whole different group,” Pfennig said. “They’re working together as a team.”

The students are also representing their schools. Coaches say their athletes feel pride in wearing their school’s colors and competing on behalf of their schools. Tymeson said that his students feel included not only on the team but also in the school.

“As they’re walking down the hall to practice or getting ready for a game, they see other student athletes from various school sports teams and there’s camaraderie. They’re telling each other to have a good practice or good luck on your game,” Tymeson said. “That is just huge for them.”

Cappuccio and other coaches added that student support for their teams has been another positive aspect of the league. At Onalaska, the pep band often plays at their games.

“Extracurricular activities are really important to all students,” Cappuccio said. “Statistics show that students who participate in extracurricular activities have higher grades, higher attendance, and better parent involvement.”

Slusser, who coaches the team at Holmen, said that parents continually comment on the improvement in the health and well-being of their children. “Across the board, this helps these students.”

■ One of a kind

It is believed that the adapted sports league in the La Crosse area is the only one of its kind in the state. Tom Shafranski, assistant director of the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA), said there are many organizations that provide guidance, rules, regulations and competitive adaptive sports events for schools. There are also other school districts that provide adaptive sports

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without oversight from a governing body. However, the fact that neighboring high schools in the La Crosse area have established teams and built a league around those teams makes it unique.

While the WIAA isn't directly involved in the league in La Crosse,

the WIAA does support adaptive sports. Since 2011, the WIAA has included several wheelchair events at the state track and field meet. In addition, for many years, the WIAA has provided waivers for students with disabilities on a case by case basis to participate in WIAA sports.

"I can tell you that we are proud to say that we do find ways to involve students with disabilities in WIAA sport offerings," Shafranski said. "The WIAA has been including students with disabilities for decades in high school athletic programs."

The WIAA has worked with the Department of Public Instruction to develop pupil nondiscrimination guidelines for athletics. The document provides clear guidance to high school athletics regarding equity issues related to gender, race, religion, disability and sexual orientation with the goal of creating

welcoming and equitable athletic programs.

Cappuccio encourages interested schools to pursue an adapted sports team, "I think this would be successful in any school." He stressed the importance of having an organized plan and the support of parents.

"My advice to anyone wanting to start a program like this is to talk with your parents and come up with a positive plan," he added. "Start simple and build support."

The coaches in La Crosse, Holmen and Onalaska agree that the investment is well worth the benefits for the students.

"It's just amazing the level of skill that these students build up," Tymeson said. "They have the ability, it's just that they hadn't previously been given the opportunity to compete." ■

Shelby Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.



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