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Arrowhead's Ben Mills (32) and Andy Fox (5) celebrate their D1 basketball title after defeating Madison Memorial 72-51 at the Kohl Center in March.

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After jumping over physical & emotional hurdles, high school student reaches the finish line

By Christina Harris,
Special Olympics Wisconsin
Special Contribution to WSN Illustrated

Throwing her light brown hair into a loose bun, Nicole Giesie, a junior at Arrowhead High School stretches out on the athletics track and ties up her worn, tattered shoe laces. As she runs towards a huddle of her teammates, she breathes in the fresh air, slowly absorbing the fact that this isn't just another after-school track practice.

Last autumn, Giesie qualified to compete in the 100 meter dash, 4X100 relay, mini javelin, and shot-put at the second-ever Special Olympics U.S.A. National Games held July 18-23 in Lincoln, Nebraska. With less than 100 days until the big trip, Giesie left her home in Hartland, Wisconsin drove to the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, and joined 62 Team Wisconsin athletes at a rigorous spring training camp.

"Going to Nationals is a dream come true," said Giesie, who started participating in Special Olympics just three years



access to a worldwide sports network ... that provides year round fitness training and health programs."

Participation in sports can be a major part of the high school experience for teenagers and before Special Olympics, many athletes feared participating against their peers without cognitive disabilities be-

they needed to tap into their athletic potential. From the backyard of her home in Maryland, Eunice Kennedy Shriver—the younger sister of U.S. President John F. Kennedy—directed a small sports camp for children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

Her goal was to have the athletes feel the

SPECIAL OLYMPICS

ago.

Giesie and a handful of high school students on Team Wisconsin will join nearly 3,000 athletes from across the nation for the six-day event in Nebraska. In addition to offering 13 sports competitions, the National Games gives individuals with cognitive disabilities a chance to travel independently, explore the country, and network with others.

With opportunities like this, it's hard to believe that just a few decades ago the thought of participating in school sports, let alone competing in a national sports competition, would have been an unattainable feat for people with cognitive disabilities.

According to Giesie's National Games Coach and Arrowhead High School Special Education teacher, John Hough, Special Olympics' creation of sports that are acknowledged and celebrated in the school system has allowed athletes to transcend inclusion boundaries.

"[Without Special Olympics] these athletes would not have the opportunity to compete on a level playing field," explained Hough. "They would not have

cause of the contrast in ability levels.

"I probably wouldn't have [competed in sports] if there was no Special Olympics because I never thought I was good at it," admitted Giesie.

Thankfully for Giesie and 10,000 athletes in Wisconsin, one woman made it her goal back in 1968 to give athletes the tools

adrenaline pumping through their veins, hear the crowd cheering their name as they crossed the finish line and, most importantly, help them realize they could achieve their dreams.

With Mrs. Shriver's passion, the small summer camp grew into what is today the largest sports organization in the world—Special Olympics. Last year, the



Special Olympics National Games athletes at the spring training camp

world wept as news spread of her death at the age of 88. But, her spirit lives on in the hearts of more than 3.1 million athletes in 170 countries across the world that spread her message of opportunity every day.

"[I've learned] you can do anything as long as you put your mind to it," said Giesie, explaining that her selection to the National Games team signifies her newfound independence and maturity. "Like for Nationals, I know as long as I set my mind to it, I can do anything."

"Three years ago, Nicole never thought about throwing a javelin and shot put, but she's awesome at it," confirmed Hough. "Special Olympics provides our athletes with a vehicle to success."

According to Hough, who has coached for the past 25 years, one of the biggest rewards has come from watching the progressive integration of Special Olympics in the school district.

"I remember watching the students give a standing ovation to the Special Olympics volleyball team...and the school giving the Special Olympics...a varsity status," recalled Hough.

Arrowhead High School used the Special Olympics model to springboard a variety of sports into the varsity status. Hough rallied support for the school to give letters to athletes in Special Olympics volleyball, gymnastics, and track. Now these sports must adhere to the same standards and guidelines as traditional sports.

Giving athletes the opportunity to play for a varsity sport allows them to set higher goals. Giesie says competing in Special Olympics sports has positively impacted her life both on and off the playing field by encouraging her to take more risks. She recently obtained her drivers license and plans on applying to attend a local technical college.

Giesie is just one athlete who has the chance to travel and gain self-confidence through Special Olympics. Thousands more have joined her. Wisconsin is one of 200 Special Olympics programs that give opportunities for athletes to travel to regional, state, national, and international sport competitions. Just like the Olympics, Special Olympics holds national competitions every four years and world competitions every other year.

While athletes are the heart of the organization, volunteers make that heart beat. With the help of more than 14,000 volunteers and 3,500 coaches statewide, Special Olympics Wisconsin is able to provide 18 year-round sports to the athletes. The dedication of teachers and coaches, like Hough, make it easy for athletes to find role models.

"He treats us like adults, just like how everyone else is going to treat you," explained Giesie. "No one is going to make it easy for you when you get out of High School...he treats you as you would be treated in the outside world."

"Every student has abilities and will need to survive in the real world just like you and I," said Hough, in regards to how Special Olympics prepares special education students to enter the workforce. "As special education teachers, that's our goal."

Whether you coach a team or volunteer a few hours once a year at sports or fundraising events, you can support local athletes in your hometown! Learn how you can help athletes jump their hurdles and cross that finish line at SpecialOlympicsWisconsin.org.

