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Friendly competition

Disabled socialize, and show off a little, in wheelchair soccer game

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Derek Gee/Buffalo News
 Cassandra Reinhardt pulls away from Danny Bayley during the first Power Wheelchair Soccer Games at Erie Community College North Campus in Amherst on Saturday.



Derek Gee/Buffalo News
 Caitlin Weir celebrates her goal during one of the championship soccer games at ECC on Saturday.



Derek Gee/Buffalo News
 Ben Muller drives the ball toward the goal as teammate Greg Wagner backs him up at the Power Wheelchair Soccer Games at Erie Community College North Campus in Amherst.

Ben Muller of the Buffalo team wheeled on a dime and pinned the oversized soccer ball against the power wheelchair next to his.

Using hand controls on the armrests, he and his opponent, a Syracuse youngster, maneuvered in tandem across the hardwood court, the ball squeezed between their chairs, each seeking an edge against the other. Suddenly the ball squirted loose and Ben found himself on a breakaway - a would-be David Beckham motoring in on goal.

Alas, the ball drifted out of bounds. Moments later Syracuse's Peyton Seffick, hell on wheels all game, rushed down the left side and nudged the winner into the Buffalo goal as time expired. There were congratulations and high-fives all around.

It was like that from start to finish - close, spirited and friendly competition - as 32 players from Buffalo, Syracuse and Rochester vied in the first Power Wheelchair Soccer Games at Erie Community College North Campus in Amherst.

The informal round-robin tournament was organized by the Independence Foundation, which provides recreational and social activities for physically disabled Western New York residents.

Ben's mother, Christine, started the foundation in her Elma home in 2005 after realizing there was no organization designed to help people like her son. She said the idea of a power soccer tournament came from Ben, a 21-year-old senior in communications at Pennsylvania's Edinboro University, where he first saw disabled students play the game.

"He said, 'I'm bored. I need something to do during the summer,'" she said. "So he brought the game home with him." Interest in the program is spreading, and tournaments are planned for Hershey, Pa., and Syracuse.

Soccer also has become a way to involve families of disabled children and adults in the foundation's quest to build a home where physically - but not mentally - disabled people can live on their own. Working with People Inc., the foundation is eyeing property in

Lancaster and working with an architect to design such a facility.

Independent living can be a challenge for those like Ben, who was born with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. When it came time to choose a college, Christine and Rick Muller discovered that area campus housing facilities were not equipped to accommodate him.

Questions like, "How's he going to get out of bed?" and, "Where's the bathroom?" drew unsatisfactory responses from officials. "It just wasn't happening," she said.

The search led to Edinboro, in Meadville, Pa., which prides itself on making college life easier for the disabled. Among the 7,600 undergraduate and graduate students are about 400 with disabilities, including 40 who use wheelchairs, Christine Muller said.

Ben, who expects to graduate this summer, will begin his working life with a mentor in the communications field, but may struggle to find a helpful living environment, his mother said.

That makes the Independence Foundation's efforts on behalf of the physically disabled all the more urgent in her mind.

"It's serious business," she said. "The idea is to give them a life. A lot of them simply want to get away from their parents."

For information about the foundation, call 685-3976 or visit www.TheIndependenceFoundation.org.

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