

TOPSoccer 2023 St Louis

Good morning - my name is Ashley Hammond - I am the co-founder of CP Soccer - CP Soccer is a nonprofit organization that we started 6 years ago in New Jersey with 5 kids and we offer soccer training across the country at no charge to kids with CP or whom have had a stroke or have an acquired Traumatic Brain injury. My motivation for starting CP Soccer is my son Shea -stroke in utero - cut when 7 - built a club - D - C - B - A - National team !

Two years ago being the founder of CP Soccer led me to becoming nominated for the chairperson of US Soccer's Disability Soccer Committee (or as we call it the DSC) like all of us volunteerism is in the blood and I said yes. We have had a fun ride and hopefully more wins than losses, but one thing has for sure remained constant - I have had tremendous support for the disability community from coast to coast. For that I say thank you -

The mission of the Disability Soccer committee is not dictated by US Soccer, instead the member groups have been working hard to define and create a vision for our community and I think today we have a really good sense of what we want to accomplish with the second iteration of our strategic plan. by way of 2 examples from the evolving plan we created the ADAPT and THRIVE working group - the leaders of the DSC are amazing people - but clearly to me at least were really struggling to add jobs to an already busy workload - so I scoured the country and found a group of willing 18-30 year old Disability workers / participants / advocates and put them together and mentored them and helped them get some of the plan done - initially they pulled off the first Disability awareness month for US soccer. This amazing annual event is a good second accomplishment to discuss - but if so you know this year we placed out first TOPSoccer member on the Adapt and Thrive group which is headed up by Joslynn Bigelow who is a mountain mover from Oregon and whose roots run deeply with TOPSoccer.

So what is the mission?

- In simple terms it is to make soccer more available for all persons with a disability at all levels. It is this last bit that is particularly important to me.

Thanks to the INCREDIBLE work of US YOUTH SOCCER and particularly the thousands of members that work hard at TOPSOCCER we have already have arguably one of the largest nationwide platforms anywhere to allow persons with a disability to play soccer. Kudos to TOPSOCCER -

The more specific disability organizations make up a much smaller percentage of the overall numbers of disability athletes playing soccer countrywide, but ALL are important. Our friends at AYSO and soon to be new members Special Olympics are the other two largest organizations. The widespread availability of soccer through these programs is extraordinary - but it is not enough. As many of you know the specificity of some disabilities may not have them best suited to a TOPS or EPIC program in terms of their development.

I believe that all athletes of any ability would be well suited to any TOPS program based on how fun they are - but that's a different objective.

At this time ONLY CP Soccer and Power Soccer have some semblance of a pathway to the National teams that I will introduce to you.

So here is a guide to the organizations.

US Soccer has the following disability organizations as members -

CP Soccer

Dwarf Soccer,

Down Syndrome Soccer,

Deaf Soccer,

Blind Soccer,

Amputee Soccer,

Power Soccer (wheelchairs) -

AYSO EPIC Soccer and of course our very one TOPSOCCER!! With Special Olympics in progress.

As previously stated - of these organizations the following have national teams

CP - Men and Women - under the US Soccer banner - referred to as the US Mens or Woman's Para-7-a-side National Teams

Power Soccer - Co-Ed - also under the U.S. soccer banner

Amputee Soccer - Co-Ed - NOT under the US Soccer banner as a national team

Deaf - Women's under the US Soccer banner

Deaf Mens - under the US Soccer banner

Dwarf Soccer - coed - NOT under the US Soccer banner as a national team

Down Syndrome Soccer - co-ed - NOT under the US Soccer banner as a national team

Blind Soccer - co-ed - NOT under the US Soccer banner as a national team

So as you can see there are lots of opportunities BUT we must guard against the tail wagging the dog syndrome.

So what is that?

Unlike the able-bodied world where we often see the vast majority of club resources going to the top 10 percent of the players we must remain balanced in our work and focus to ensure that athletes with and without National team aspirations are all catered for.

To that end we spent a large portion of our time last year galvanizing the DSC and I convinced the group to write a first evert grant application for the collective group for the exclusive use by the DSC at the grass roots level. In an historic first U.S. Soccer granted us 200,000 over three years to help accomplish the goals laid out in our strategic plan regarding awareness and increasing player participation. Your own leader Dave Robinson was at the forefront of edits and advice as we went

through the process and where others laid barriers - Tom Sowinski and US Youth Soccer leaders said we can do.

Next week we receive the first tranche of the money and we will be working hard to move that money out into the field over the coming months.

Moving forward we are now emboldened to write more grants for the collective group and similarly create fund raising opportunities for the "collective group"

I believe it is crucial that we follow the lead of US Youth Soccer and in particular the TOPSoccer leadership where we do NOT have fiefdoms instead we have sharing and passing athletes along to other groups if they are best suited to move on.

So what can we do - thank you for what you do but as you know 25 % of the population has a disability. Granted we have many "undiagnosed" players in able bodied soccer but we are missing huge swaths of the population simply because we don't have adequate or any programming for them. We have attempted to get a grip of the number of players that are not in a "US Member" program but this is obviously a monumental effort given our geography. With that being said what we can do - which is better than what we can't do is simply increase awareness everywhere. Hopefully then if we cast a wide net, our haul is significant.

Over the coming months you will see some of the initiatives that we are going to fund from the grant including jamboree style events. I hosted Amputee soccer at my indoor facility a few weeks ago in NJ and Fox local did a wonderful segment on the camp. They have already seen the number of people contacting them jump. I find that SO many people that we are involved in our community are great advocates BUT sometimes they are TOO humble about what they do. Shouting about your work and seeking to keep the spotlight on our amazing athletes is crucial. Don't assume that your local news station has done a piece recently - heck we have the annual Punxsutawney Phil rodent event on EVERY news station in NY EVERY YEAR - have they not worked out that despite a 50/50 chance of getting it right he is usually WRONG - come on - we have a better story than that !!! We should have the spring and fall kick off of all disability events covered.

Awareness means growth -

Growth means awareness -

For us to have a voice we MUST keep growing our numbers. We have taken it upon ourselves to make US Soccer want our number every year. Cindy and now JT the CEO have welcomed our voices and I believe are committed to helping our member groups. Giving us one of the largest grants is a real step forward and we now need to capitalize on this opportunity.

You might say well how do we make our program better. I am not suggesting that we can't all be better BUT as I travel the country I have watched countless TOPSoccer programs - and I am ALWAYS blown away with the ingenuity and broad array of ideas that I see. At the convention this year i saw a masterclass from a TOPS volunteer. In Cincinnati last year I saw a genius at work with that TOPS program and I can go on.

Ashley Hammond, US Soccer Disability Soccer Committee

So yes we want to make programs better but across the country in CP and TOPS and Deaf and Blind and so on I see genius at work more often than not. What we need is to find MORE players and I look forward to working with you on that primary target that we have set out for the DSC.

My son who did a TED talk - spends 20 minutes his entire talk coming back to one thing - I have a TEAM - on Monday morning I can talk with the guys on the playground as an equal - I have a team

So if you are Interested in getting involved - adapt and thrive and committee

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