

# TELL ME, WY

*Adapted sports programming needs to be expanded in both schools and the community so everyone has the opportunity to participate in athletics.*



BY WYATT MEYER  
Lead Copy Editor

For as long as they've existed, sports have been reserved for a certain type of athlete. They're on television – the able-bodied, neurotypical, big, strong, quick, agile, insert-superlative-here force that wows the audience with spectacular plays.

That's "the athlete." The so-called best of the best, the poster child for American sports, the one kids dream about being as they fall asleep at night.

Unfortunately, that definition of an athlete is as

sickeningly limited as it is exclusive.

"The athlete" isn't in a wheelchair. "The athlete" doesn't have a sensory impairment. "The athlete" doesn't have cerebral palsy.

In 2019, the National Survey of Children's Health identified one in four children ages 12 to 17 as having special healthcare needs, many of which restrict athletic opportunities. That means for every three children dreaming of being "the athlete" at night, there's one who knows they can never fit the mold.

That has to change.

By only promoting and accommodating traditional sports, communities and sports organizations are closing off athletic opportunities to more than a fourth of people. These organizations, both at a school and community level, must do

more to ensure that people with disabilities can access sports, too.

This isn't as hard as it may seem. Organizations like the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs work to promote adapted sports, which alter traditional games so that athletes with physical and mental disabilities can play. These sports make a big step in increasing access and inclusivity to those unable to participate in traditional sports.

In fact, the AAASP is partnering with the Georgia Department of Education to bring adapted sports programs, including wheelchair basketball, football and handball, to Clarke County School District schools over 2023 and 2024.

As part of this programming, Clarke Central High School will begin offering wheelchair handball later this year exclusively to those with physical disabilities and sensory impairments.

"There's a lot of positive outcomes that come from participating in athletics, so we're hopeful that providing these opportunities will just enhance the learning experience (in the


CCSD)," Chris Aiken, CCHS Associate Athletic Director and CCSD adapted sports area coordinator, said. "(Adapted sports are) just another avenue to get kids involved in something they're interested in."

These efforts can't just take place scholastically. Athens-Clarke County sponsors traditional sports leagues in everything from basketball to karate, which are largely accessible to those who wish to participate.

However, adapted sports community programs are few and far between in Athens. The local YMCA, located at 915 Hawthorne Ave., offers adapted swimming for children ages 5-12 with special needs, while Extra Special People, Inc., located at 189 VFW Drive in Watkinsville, provides additional adapted sports programming, but suffice to say, more programs are needed.

No one deserves to have their right to play sports denied to them, so increasing access to adapted sports needs to be a priority.

At the school level, more schools need to follow the CCSD's example and set up adapted sports programming for disabled student-athletes. At the community level, community leaders and organizations must work to enable families to take advantage of their adapted sports opportunities.

These changes won't affect the majority of people, but the impact on the few will be intangible. And maybe, with enough work, there will be a kid in a wheelchair redefining what "the athlete" is. 

*No one deserves to have their right to play sports denied to them, so increasing access to adapted sports needs to be a priority.*



Left: CLOSED-OFF COURT: Two adapted sports athletes play wheelchair handball. More school districts must follow the Clarke County School District's example and provide adapted sports programming for disabled student-athletes to accompany community-sponsored adapted sports opportunities. "By only promoting and accommodating traditional sports, communities and sports organizations are closing off athletic opportunities to more than a fourth of people," Lead Copy Editor Wyatt Meyer wrote. Illustration by Sam Harwell