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## **Unified Teams Take Special Olympics Approach to School Sports**



Matt Nager for The New York Times

Shane Powell (41) and members of the Grandview High School unified basketball team in Aurora, Colo.

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AURORA, Colo. — Not long ago, high school was a lonesome place for Shane Powell. A quiet, gangly 17-year-old, he could not help noticing the whispers in the hallways when he walked past, classmates poking fun at him.



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Unified sports teams combine special-needs students, like Powell, a 17-year-old junior who is cognitively delayed, and general-education students.

“I was picked on,” said Powell, who is cognitively delayed and speaks in short, soft bursts. “I felt very sad.”

These days, Powell is a junior basketball star at Grandview, a [sprawling public high school](#) of 2,600 students near Denver, and he prefers to be called Big Shane, a nickname reinforced by his 6-foot-4 beanpole frame.

Through a collaboration with the [Special Olympics](#), Powell and nearly two dozen other special education students participate on basketball and cheerleading squads at Grandview. They not only take part in school competitions, but also team up with general education students, called partner athletes.

At Grandview, these unified teams are upending high school’s archetypal and often cruel social order. Largely invisible in the past, special education students now slap hands with lettermen in the hallways, chat with new friends and live a high school existence that “feels normal,” said one parent, Kelly Shearer.

Kurt Wollenweber, Grandview’s principal, said: “Unified has transformed the culture of this school. It was almost as if these kids weren’t noticed before we began doing this. I don’t think anyone realized how powerful they are.”

Born of the idea that athletic events can be especially transformative when they include individuals who have special needs alongside those who do not, unified programs have existed about two decades.

In 2008, with money from the federal Department of Education, the Special Olympics began putting the programs into schools. More than 2,000 schools in 42 states have unified athletic programs, with varying levels of intensity.

“We know that the interaction that happens in unified sports is the point at which a change in attitude happens for all students involved,” said Andrea Cahn, the senior director of [Project Unify](#) for the Special Olympics national office in Washington.

“Our athletes have an unconditional appreciation for other people. They persevere even in the face of being bullied and teased. We can pull back the veil of the unknown and make people real.”

With unified basketball, one of the more common sports played at schools, modified rules require at least three players with cognitive disabilities for each team on the court. The remaining players can be partner athletes, who typically do not take many shots.

Last school year, Grandview’s first using unified programs, the basketball team went 8-1 and won the state Special Olympics championship. The games, which are usually played between the junior varsity and varsity contests, crackle with the intensity of traditional high school sports. They regularly outdraw them, too.

At a recent game against the rival Overland’s unified team, a packed crowd of students, parents and faculty members roared for both sides, seeming not to care about the wild shots hoisted high off the backboard, traveling violations or which team scored.

Cory Chandler, Grandview’s young coach, who also coaches freshman baseball and football at Grandview, pumped his fist after the freshman Mathew Philippi sank his first basket of the season.

Philippi, who is autistic and barely speaks, threw his hands up in shock, grinned sheepishly and shuffled toward the bench before a partner athlete coaxed him down the floor to play defense.

“It’s unlike any coaching experience I’ve ever had,” Chandler said. “I’ve never got teary-eyed during baseball or football. With this, I fight back tears during every game.”

The effect, at least at Grandview, is equally profound for partner athletes, who in many cases are popular overachievers, handpicked by coaches and special education teachers.

“These guys are not my teammates anymore; they are more my friends,” said Payton Soicher, a senior baseball player who also plays unified basketball.

In Colorado, whose state Special Olympics organization has been at the forefront of the unify movement, the program is also growing. This academic year, 20 high schools fielded unified programs, with 325 special education students participating. Last school year 11 schools and 155 special education students were involved. The number of partner athletes has also risen substantially.

Jon Hoerl, an assistant principal at Overland, helped start the program at Grandview when he was its athletic director.

“The kids get to wear the same uniforms, the same warm-ups,” Hoerl said. “We announce the lineups. The whole idea is to get them the mainstream experience of a high school athlete. They just want to be included.”

Georgi McFail, a Grandview sophomore, has [Apert syndrome](#), a genetic disease characterized by severe physical deformities. She was teased mercilessly in middle school, said Shearer, her mother.

“Just a lot of tears,” Shearer recalled.

A Grandview special education teacher told them about the unified spirit squad, and with some nudging, McFail joined.

“Her confidence has just soared,” Shearer said. “Now she says, ‘I’m going to be a cheerleader all through high school.’ She doesn’t feel so different anymore.”

At the basketball game against Overland, McFail, in her blue-and-white uniform, cheered quietly, keeping up with all the steps. She threw her hands, which have fused bones and which she used to hide in her pockets, high in the air.

“I get to go cheer for the games, and the varsity cheerleaders have become my good friends,” she said.

They had plenty to cheer about, as the teams traded baskets during a close second half. Michael Bush, a senior with cerebral palsy who had fallen in with a rough crowd before

joining the basketball team, stared at the ceiling after missing a layup. Seconds later, he hit a jump shot and implored the crowd to cheer.

Bush's friend Big Shane Powell, though, was the star of the game, flying down the floor to make layup after layup. Chandler, the coach, recalled a time when Powell, who also has behavioral disorders, was filled with anger and once threw punches at him and another coach during practice.

After Grandview built a big lead during a recent game, Chandler pulled Powell aside.

"I told him, 'I want you to be a partner athlete for the rest of the game,' " Chandler said.

Powell hustled back into the game, grabbed a rebound and handed the ball to an opposing player so he could make a shot, too.