

Sports News

July 2009— Newsletter of the **Utah Salt Lake City Area Sports**

YOUTH LIVING THE VALUES

By Craig Ulrich, Sandy East Region Sports Director

Something magical happened the night of February 12, 2009 on an ordinary cultural hall basketball court. I had been visiting various stakes in my calling as Region Sports Director and decided to drop in on the Granite South Stake to watch two ward Priest Quorum teams play each other. Both teams were well represented with players, and play began as usual with the starters quickly scoring on both sides. Then the surprise. After just a few minutes of play, substitutions were made and two young men, whose names are TJ and Ben, were brought into play. Both are physically challenged but able to play basketball.

As I watched the way these young men were supported by the other players, I found myself intrigued to the point that I wanted to learn their story. Perhaps you'll find it as inspiring as I do.

This group of Young Men in the Granite 16th Ward had been playing ward basketball together for more than five years. TJ was born with Down Syndrome. In spite of the challenges this creates, "The boys on the team have allowed him to be as big a part of the team as they are," according to Sister Sherry Hancock, TJ's Mother. She adds, "They also take care of Ben, who was born pre-mature and weighed around one pound at birth, which creates some physical limitations for him, as well."

But it wasn't just the boys from the 16th Ward—the opposing team players also adjusted their play, implementing a "soft defense" so that TJ and Ben could participate to the fullest of their abilities. The magic, to me, was that in spite of the competitive nature of basketball the young men played and the leaders, on both teams, have created an environment

of safety and support for TJ and Ben. "All people function better when they are surrounded with support. It is no different for these two boys." The Young Men's group has created this atmosphere and these two boys have responded.

But even that isn't the end of this wonderful story. Another highlight for me was to witness what was happening on the side lines. I was surprised to see that a large group of young men had shown up to the game and were cheering for TJ. Usually, stake games are played in front of a small group of parents and youth leaders—not a crowd full of fans. What I didn't know at the time is that TJ was also the Basketball Manager for the Jordan High School Boys Basketball Team, and the group of young men who came to cheer him on was his teammates on the high school team. The same support system that the stake has created has developed at their high school, as well—and not necessarily by adults, but by these wonderful young men who create an environment in which TJ can function as one of the guys. On this particular night the basketball players from Jordan were returning a favor to TJ since he had cheered them on for so many games in their basketball season. Boys of all faiths were able to witness the love and support extended by the Priests from both wards, their coaches, the refs, and the fans. It was a magnificent display of true sportsmanship as they let TJ and Ben be part of the team. Sister Hancock expressed her feelings this way. "In the last 5 years this church team has only won a handful of games. But, they have won more in the hearts of the mother's of these two boys than any title or championship could ever bring."

When I arrived at the Granite South Stake Center that night I had no idea my life would be touched in a unique and special way. But as I left this game, I was humbled and grateful for the example set by the remarkable young men of the Granite South Stake

who truly exemplify the ideal of the Church Sports program to “Bring all unto Christ.”

CHURCH SPORTS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

The world’s getting more complicated for young adults. There’s an interesting new paradox in the way people in this generation communicate with one another. For example, in spite of the explosion of online means of communication—Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instant Messaging, etc.—many young adults find it more difficult than ever to find real face time to interact with friends in a live environment. While there are some great things about online communication, there’s still a lot to be said for getting together and having fun.

Church Sports is one way to give young adults a reason to come together. To find out what’s available we conducted an interview with Gary Larsen who, with his wife Suzanne, are our Area Young Adult Directors.

You’ve had some Area wide events so far in 2009. Was there a lot of participation?

We’ve had great attendance. For example, on May 30th the Young Single Adults held a Salt Lake Valley Area Sports at Cottonwood Regional Park where the youth played Sandlot Volleyball and Ultimate Disc (Ultimate Frisbee). We were able to field 11 Volleyball teams at 10 per team and 6 Ultimate Disc teams at about 10 per team. The kids had a great time.

That’s approximately 160 participants. Is it something they value?

It’s amazing just how complimentary they were—both at the event and with follow-up e-mails. The most common response was, “We should do this more often.” Of course we love providing events at the Area level, but this indicates to me that Young Adult Sports would also succeed at the regional and stake levels.

From your point of view, what are the advantages of involving young adults in Church Sports?

Church Sports offers a great deal to young adults. Here are four: 1) it builds camaraderie and friendships between young adults and coaches, and consequently their affinity with the Church; 2) it helps them learn to get along with people in both victory and defeat (win and lose graciously); 3) it’s a great way to release the stresses of life; and 4) it’s an easy way to introduce people to the church—we’ve seen a lot of success in young adults using a sport activity to introduce friends who are not members of the church.

Sportsmanship is always a concern in sports. How is it with the Young Adults?

Actually, the kids have been great—we haven’t had any trouble with sportsmanship at the events we’ve sponsored so far. We start out by talking about it.

Most of the tournaments do not have refs—players call it on themselves. We will need refs for basketball.

Are Church Sports available to all Young Adults in the Utah Salt Lake City Area?

Young adult chances to participate depend a lot on where they live. The UofU program is highly organized and very successful, but out in the community it’s more hit and miss. Some stakes do a great job, others are not as well organized.

How do you communicate with young adults to let them know what’s available in Church Sports?

We wish we had more comprehensive lists. Our primary communication is to send letters to all the YSA bishops. That list is easy to get. We also use Sports News and Next Up, hoping that the folks on this list pass the information along. We know that there are approximately 400 YSA shepherding couples, but we don’t know who they are. It would be great if we could get their e-mails from the stakes.

What events do you plan to host at the Area level?

We plan to host a number of annual events: Co-Ed Volleyball Tournament; Sports Night at the Sports Mall (3-3 basketball; tennis; racquetball; volleyball; dodgeball; aerobics; water aerobics; exercise room) held in February from 11:00 pm to 1:00 am, (this year nearly 500 young adults attended); Ultimate Disc Tournament; Sandlot Volleyball Tournament; and a Bicycle Ride on the Jordan River Parkway. We’d also like to do a playoff basketball tournament, but there are some issues to work through with that.

What would you say to Priesthood Leaders about the YSA Church Sports Program?

They should know that there are a lot of YSA who are borderline active who find their allegiance and or fellowship to the Church is strengthened by participating in Church Sports.

How can people learn more?

Get in touch with us. Call Gary or Suzanne @ 801-943-3744 or send an e-mail to Glarsen222@yahoo.com p.s. be sure to attend our July 3rd bicycle ride—see *Next Up* for details.

Our thanks to Gary and Suzanne for all you do to help our Young Adults!

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