

# Board's Special Olympics basketball game comes north



TED BROWN / SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

**AIRBORNE:** The Toronto Raptors mascot, The Raptor, flies over Halton Catholic District School Board Director of Education Lou Piovesan for a slam dunk during the Hoops for All event in Georgetown.

By Eamonn Maher  
SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

Not even the energetic Toronto Raptors' mascot could take the spotlight away from some enthusiastic young athletes at a recent basketball game in Georgetown.

Eighty-six special-needs children in the Halton Catholic District School Board took part in the third annual 'Hoops For All' Special Olympics game of hoops at St. Catherine of Alexandria Elementary School.

Organizers kept score but the real intent of the contest was to make sure all athletes received equal playing time, which was quite a challenge considering the large number of players on each squad.

The game between the Halton Raptors and the Halton Raptor Busters was an opportunity for the students to have fun, be part of a team and demonstrate the board's philosophy of "inclusive education."

Each Special Olympian was paired up with a mentor athlete — someone within a school who's recognized as a student leader — and they spent quality time together on and off the court.

"I just wanted to get one basket and I've already done that, so it's time for everyone to have some fun," said grade 6 student Patrick Sequeira of Mother Teresa in Oakville, which hosted the inaugural event. "I have a basketball court at home, so I get to play a lot. I still have the video from the (Hoops For All) first year to watch sometimes."

Debbie Cseryei, an educational assistant at Mother Teresa, said she'd like to see more events like Hoops For All and the Special Olympics Torch Run so that students like Sequeira don't only benefit themselves, but so that they can contribute to the school community as well.

"Patrick's a very verbal and social kid and has no trouble making friends," said Cseryei. "He's a great supporter and very enthusiastic with the other kids, and he was really good today telling the new students at the game what to expect."

Held in the south end of Halton for the first two editions of Hoops For All, this year's event was shifted north by organizers and a crowded, loud gymnasium greeted the athletes. As well as the benefit of physical exercise, the game serves as a confidence-builder for the Special Olympians and helps them gain acceptance amongst their classmates.

The gym erupted in cheers when St. Catherine of Alexandria's own Alyssa Lumanna wheeled out onto the court with her mentor, Michelle Seedhouse, pushing her chair.

"I'm leaving it all up to Michelle. She does the hard work. I just need to get the ball in the basket," said Lumanna, a grade 7 student, who has cerebral palsy. "I have known Michelle since kindergarten and she's my best friend. We do

cross-country running and play volleyball together also."

Alyssa's mother, Sandie, has noticed the difference in her daughter's self-confidence, sociability and improvement in her schoolwork because of her involvement with athletics.

"She's really loving school this year," said Lumanna. "Having the other kids' support is really nice. She can pick up the phone if she gets stuck with her homework and ask, 'Michelle, I need your help.' It's been amazing."

Tracey Newman, an educational assistant at St. Catherine of Alexandria, said that initially, Lumanna's fear of being hit in the head with the basketball was causing her to hesitate, but after that, both the 12-year-old's strength and dexterity grew to the point where she took up another sport — wrestling.

"One of the challenges for any special-needs child is to have the same involvement that every other child has the ability to do," Newman explained. "Her classmates are fantastic for including Alyssa with whatever they're doing and when she's included in everyone else's activities, it reflects in the rest of her school load."

Mentor-athlete Adriel Cedeno of St. Mark's in Burlington said it's very rewarding to pass on some tips and

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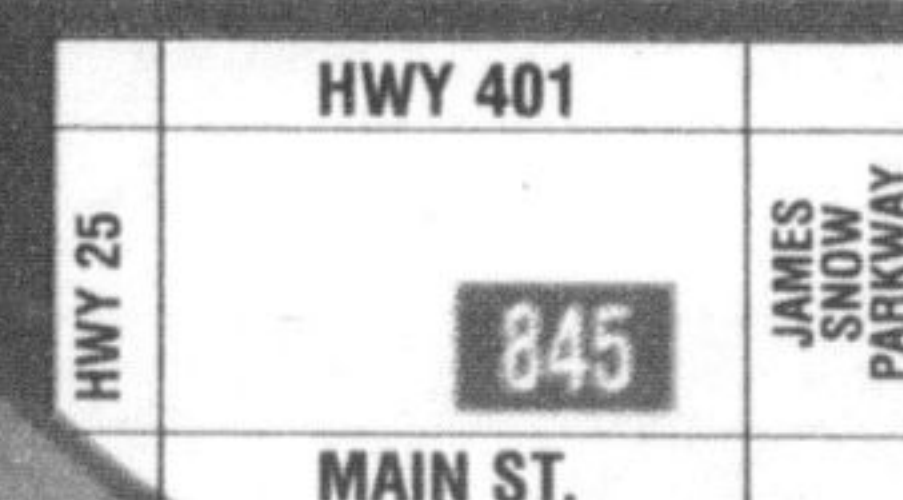
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