

DURHAM

Special Olympics athletes shine at 'Spirit' event

By John Doyle

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DURHAM — Longtime Special Olympics coach and volunteer Todd Borchers created the Special Spirit event, to give athletes like his a chance to experience what it's like to be the center of attention at a big-time sporting event.

"We gave them everything you can see at a college-like event — the glitz, the glam, the announcers, the fans, mascots, cheerleaders, entertainment," said Borchers, who works as an academic adviser at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell. "We want this show to be just for them. They're used to being the halftime show for the events at their schools. I wanted this event to be special for them."

Tuesday night, March 29, was the second annual edition of the event held at the University of New Hampshire's Lundholm Gym. Before a crowd whose size rivaled any UNH sporting event or New Hampshire high school state tournament game, Special Olympics basketball players from Portsmouth High School, Pinkerton Academy and surrounding communities' schools went head-to-head.

Among those to cheer on the athletes at Lundholm were the UNH pep band, mascots "Gnarlz" and "Wild E. Cat," the UNH cheerleaders, spirit squad and dance team, hundreds of UNH athletes and coaches from all sports, and hundreds of other fans and well wishers, cheering loudly for every shot, dribble and

defensive play.

"I love everything I do but I think these athletes deserve the most we can give to them," Borchers said.

Ellis Guijarro, 15, of the Portsmouth team, got a chance to pull off a play he and his teammates had worked on during practice. He called it "jelly on the block" and said it got a huge cheer from the audience.

"My favorite part was the 'jelly on the block,'" Guijarro said. "Everybody cheered."

Zack Mason, 19, wore a Golden State Warriors T-shirt underneath his Portsmouth jersey.

"It was pretty good," Mason said. "I helped my teammates out."

The event also included a performance by the UNH dance team, a slam-dunk demonstration from members of the UNH men's basketball team, and a dance-off among Special Olympics participants between the third and fourth quarters.

The event was a fundraiser for both schools' Special Olympics programs, with some of the proceeds going toward future Special Spirit events. Admission was free but donations were accepted at the door, and prizes, such as Boston Celtics tickets, were raffled off.

Portsmouth coach Bryan Rogers said the event was all about the athletes.

"They absolutely loved it," Rogers said. "It's all they've been talking about for weeks.

You can just see their faces, the high-fives, entertaining the crowd. They were amazing tonight."

Hannah Bergeron of Wolfeboro and Alyson Roy of Biddeford, Maine, both senior occupational therapy majors at UNH, were the main organizers of the Special Spirit event. They said planning began back in September.

"It's really a collaborative effort," Roy said. "Special Spirit fit right into what we do as occupational therapy majors."

Bergeron said she estimated Tuesday night's crowd to be double of what showed up for last year's Special Spirit event.

"Last year it was basically one side of the gym full," Bergeron said. "This year it's full. And we've raised a ton more funds and donations so far. All that money will benefit the two local participating teams and go back into Special Spirit so we can continue to have this event."

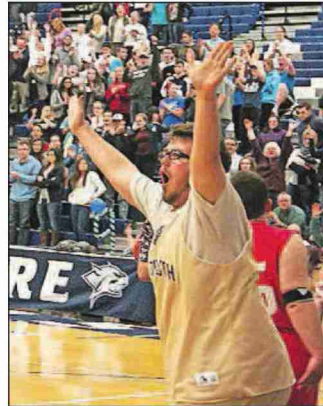




Portsmouth High School's Derek Baer goes up for a shot as two Pinkerton defenders close in. RYAN O'LEARY/SEACOASTONLINE



Portsmouth's Darryl Date, right, goes in for the layup Tuesday afternoon during the 2016 Special Spirit @UNH basketball game in Lundholm Gymnasium in Durham. PHOTO BY SHAWN ST.HILAIRE/FOSTERS.COM



Portsmouth's Zach Mason raises his hands high after sinking a basket. PHOTO BY SHAWN ST.HILAIRE/FOSTERS.COM