

WHAT UP AT LOCAL HIGH SCHOOLS

Truly unified

Milford hoop team puts on show for the whole school

By HECTOR LONGO

Staff Writer

MILFORD – The final outcome still in doubt with Milford leading by four in the final minute, Spartan Jason Short grabbed himself a man-sized defensive rebound and did his coaches proud. He handed the ball off to a Keene player who hadn't yet scored.

"We check the scorebook at halftime and seek out the opponents who haven't scored," said Milford coach Steve Erdody. "That's what we do."

Welcome to Unified Basketball, the hottest varsity sport governed by the NHIAA where the heart of the players are not measured in wins and losses but by smiles and high-fives.

Unified basketball is a program that mixes special needs student-athletes with their "athletic part-

ners" as teammates in friendly competition. There are two levels, developmental, which is the more competitive, and recreational, where Milford High's program, now in its seventh season (all under Coach Erdody), resides.

What started with 16 teams across the Granite State is now up to 43.

Monday morning, Milford High hosted Keene in a battle before a full house, the Spartans' entire student body took in the action. It was the highlight of the season.

In all, the Milford team is made up of nine athletes and 12 partners, all of whom participated in Monday morning's "win."

The highlights in Monday morning's game, like Short's sportsmanship-driven assist, were too long to list, each conjuring a tear in the eyes of the most hard-hearted onlooker:

The ear-to-ear smile on Caity Burns' face as she buried a short 8-foot jumper.

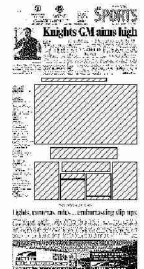
The intensity in the eyes of Brooke O'Brien as she lines up her third straight basket, and the double-fist pump as the ball swished through the net.

The sheer joy from Kevin Polneau as he led the crowd through the "Happy Birthday" song on his own special day.

And the high-fives ... player to player ... coach to player ... opponent to opponent.

All of it, jam-packed into 32 minutes of joy for these special athletes.

"All you have to do is come to one game, and you see how great it really is," said Maria Yanez, the Special Olympics director in Milford and an assistant coach to Erdody with the unified team.





Staff photo by HECTOR LONGO

A packed house, the entire Milford High student body, has its eyes on Spartans unified basketball player Jacob Wilson as he goes to the basket.