

## Unified sports continues to bring athletes together

BY BOB MARTIN

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MEREDITH — Inter-Lakes Athletic Director and unified basketball coach Jeff Cloos sees the importance of unified sports in the school system, saying that it has helped build relationships between the partners and athletes not only during games, but in the hallways.

“It has been a successful program getting the kids involved, both the partners and athletes, working side by side,” Cloos said. “Some give up their own basketball wants and needs to sacrifice for the greater good of the team, and the experience for everyone.”

Cloos said this bridges the gap between the school population, saying that it is always great to see the partners and athletes talking with each other and relating to each other when they may not have been able to before.

The unified program involves a partnership between Moultonborough Academy and Inter-Lakes, and Cloos said it has been a success from the beginning. The

program involves partnering students with those with disabilities, in an effort to promote companionship and positivity on and off the court or playing field.

“The interaction helps the confidence and feeling of belonging for the kids,” said Cloos.

At Inter-Lakes and Moultonborough, players can participate in unified basketball in the winter as well as soccer in the fall and volleyball in the spring. The program started six years ago and has grown over the years.

“It is a really fun environment to be a part of,” said Cloos. “It is a nice change in my day to go out and do this, and coach basketball in the purest form.”

Unified sports have been in existence since 1988 when it was adopted by the Special Olympics. The first sports were bowling, volleyball and softball. The program is focused on breaking down stereotypes of people with intellectual disabilities, and hundreds of thousands of people participate around the world.

The Inter-Lakes/

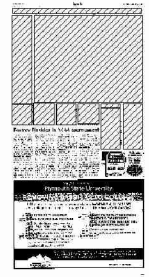
Moultonborough team is involved in what Cloos called the “recreational league,” which means there are no standings. There are also some teams, such as Belmont and Gilford, that are in the NHIAA and it is treated like a varsity sport with a state tournament and an eventual champion.

Cloos said he sees many of the same athletes who come back and play year after year. He said many will play all three sports, but there are also some new faces that come through.

As a coach, Cloos said it is a breath of fresh air.

“Sometimes you get bogged down with coaches, officials, players and it can be tough,” said Cloos. “This is basketball at its purest and it is a positive experience where everyone is cheering for everyone. It is also great to see the enjoyment on the faces of the athletes, while also seeing the partners interact with them. It is so enjoyable for me.”

Unified volleyball is coached by Leslie Nesbit, and the season will start next week.





COLD BROOK STUDIOS – COURTESY PHOTO

(Left) The unified collaboration between Inter-Lakes and Moultonborough has been going for six years, and basketball coach Jeff Cloos couldn't be happier with the positivity it has brought to the school districts. The basketball team consisted of Debbie Bickford, Jake Borsh, Ellie Cristiano, Ben Dennis, Katie Dubois, Emma Ledger, Ian McCabe, Jasmine Morrissette, Emily Mussen, Jenny Packard, Ashley Paquin, Micayla Sorell, Nathan Sullivan and Brandon Patten. The team was coached by Cloos and Tianna Adams.