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Soccer reaches out to disabled youth

by Melissa A. Chadwick | Staff Writer

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The cutlines for this story were corrected from their print version on June 15.

Nine-year-old Ben Sellers dodged players left and right, eyeing the soccer ball as it rolled toward him and his mother, whose hand he grasped tightly.

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Ben, who is autistic, timidly gave the ball a light kick, dropped his mother's hand and then grabbed hold again.

Ben and his mother aren't the only child-parent pair on the field. He's not teased by his 30 teammates for having his mom with him, and the coaches don't complain, even if the field is a little crowded.

Ben is enrolled in the Sports Plus program at the Maryland SoccerPlex in Boyds. The program is designed specifically for children with autism.

Soccer is taking on a new role for many youngsters as it reaches children with developmental and physical disabilities through what are called adaptive sports programs, parents and coaches say.

"Most of these groups are formed by parents so their children have that sense of normalcy with other kids, or to be doing the same thing as their brother or sister," said Todd Roby, spokesman for Texas-based



Naomi Brookner/The Gazette
Natalie Liniak shows her son Jonathan, 8 cheer after he scores a goal during Sport Maryland SoccerPlex in Boyds. Liniak an started Sports Plus in 2005 for children w



U.S. Youth Soccer, which has 3 million youth players and sponsors a program for special needs children.

Two soccer programs in Montgomery focus on youth with specific disabilities — autism and deafness.

In 2005, Gaithersburg residents Tom and Natalie Liniak founded Sports Plus, a multi-sport program for autistic children that plays most of its games at the SoccerPlex.

The Liniaks knew their 8-year-old autistic son, Jonathan, soon would have to sit on the sidelines while their 6-year-old son, Robert, played ball.

“It was pretty clear that he would need more attention,” Tom Liniak said at a coffee shop near the family’s Kentlands home. “There were countless other opportunities for his brother to play sports, but much more limited opportunities for Jon.”

In March, Denise Kowalczyk of Germantown started a soccer team for deaf and hearing children at the SoccerPlex.

Kowalczyk, who is deaf, wanted her youngest son, Marden, 5, who is hard of hearing, to play soccer on the fields just down the street from their house.

Both Sports Plus and Kowalczyk’s team focus on skills building rather than competition. Between the 100 children from 3 to 14 from Montgomery, Prince George’s, Carroll and Howard counties and Washington, Virginia, lace up their sneakers for weekly sessions on the Crayola-green grass at the SoccerPlex that is “like a carpet,” as one mom said.

Recreational therapy

Autism — a developmental disorder that makes it a struggle to participate in social situations or read social cues — affects 1 in 150 children in the United States, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

There are 1,060 students in Montgomery County public schools with autism.

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Its cause is not known, but scientists say that both genetics and the environment may play a role. Ther

Sports Plus could be described as recreational therapy, the Liniaks said. They created a program — th multi-sport play in the summer and late-fall — with the guidance of certified trainers and coaches, spe professionals, therapists and other parents.

“These kids are in therapy all the time. There are a lot of ‘have-to’s,’” Tom Liniak said. “We want to the therapists and create a program where they can have fun. They’re taking things they learned in the using it, even if they don’t even realize it.”

The improvements can be significant over time. Nine-year-old Ben doesn’t always reach for the hand Dee Sellers. This is his fifth session in Sports Plus.

“The first season, he really shadowed me. We were like one person,” Sellers of Gaithersburg said wh blanket on the sidelines last month. “I was helping him physically through everything. By the third se jumping out of the car and it was, ‘Bye, Mom.’”

Sometimes, like this day, Ben repeatedly returns to the sidelines to see Sellers and his younger sister, players return to their parents, too. Prompting one of the nine coaches to urge them to get back on the

“Come on, Ben! Let’s play!” one coach said, swinging her arms in a circle.

He stood at the edge of the blanket, gulped some water and then, with a slight hesitation, circled back

It can be scary for any parent to enroll their child in sports. A developmental disability can make it mc parents of autistic children said.

“He’s never done sports before because we were afraid to put him on a sports team,” Potomac resident Salzberg said of her son, Justin, 8. “He has a sense of understanding of sports that we never knew he

The progress Ben and Justin display isn’t rare for Sports Plus participants, the Liniaks said.

Many parents enrolled their children in Sports Plus so an autistic sibling could mirror the experience c sister.

“I’m always taking his sister somewhere — tennis, dance,” said Silver Spring resident Mary Beth Eth son Justin, 11, is autistic. “It’s nice that he finally has something that he’s proud of and that he can tal he’s at the point in his life where he realizes that he’s different. So it’s nice when he’s here and kids at

Justin stood next to his dad, Mike, who slung an arm around his son.

“Let’s stay here,” Justin said with a wide grin, his metallic blue (his favorite color) and white ball at h

While his parents chatted with others, Justin paced behind them — a repetitive behavior and one of the disorder.

“I like making new friends,” Justin said when asked about Sports Plus. “It’s great. It’s good.”

Kicking their way

The field was still damp when Marden Kowalczyk, pleading with his big blue eyes, asked his mother for a frosted doughnut.

But practice hadn’t yet started for the deaf and hard-of-hearing 3- to 5-year-olds in the Soccer Association of Montgomery’s Pre-Kicks program.

His mother, Denise Kowalczyk, approached the SoccerPlex earlier this year about children with hearing impairments participating in soccer programs.

“Marden has older siblings in soccer,” Kowalczyk said through an interpreter during a practice in Montgomery. “He has his own team. It’s nice for them to have this experience as a group and get to know other children with hearing impairments.”

So Kowalczyk created a team for deaf and hard-of-hearing children and hired an interpreter. The inaugural practice ended earlier this month.

“I thought it was a really great idea because a lot of [deaf] schools offer programs — Gallaudet, other schools in D.C.,” said interpreter Kris Walker, 22, of Germantown who learned to sign before he learned to talk. “My father is deaf. “It’s too far to drive. It’s not fair to ask them to drive so far for a 45-minute class.”

Like children in Sports Plus, Walker has noticed increased confidence and improved social skills among disabled players.

“Some kids, on the first day of practice, didn’t want to leave their parents’ side,” Walker said.

After she chomped on a pink-frosted donut, Crystal Salit, 4, of Boyds kicked her way clear across the field.

Her father, Jeff Salit, sought an athletic outlet for his daughter that would cater to her needs.

“I knew my daughter would have a hard time participating because they can’t get an interpreter for just her,” said Salit, the head baseball coach for Gallaudet University in Washington. “With the little kids, it can be difficult.”

He paused and looked at Crystal, who started her run back across the field.

“I’ve definitely seen an improvement with C.J. and soccer. If she was with hearing kids, I know she’d be better.”

standing in a corner. Here, she's developing fundamental skills," Salit said.

Then Crystal explained — her father translated — what she likes best about the Saturday morning pra

“I like kicking and running,” she said. “I like running with my friends and kicking with my friends.”

More than scoring goals

On Sunday, Sports Plus players received end-of-session medals. One kid kissed his; another didn't wa

When it was Ben's turn to go through the aisle of coaches — arms extended for low high-fives — coa and players raised their arms above their heads and waved their hands in silent applause. Ben doesn't attention.

It's the coaches and therapists who are rewarded, though, said coach Aaron Anderson, 23, of Gaithers

The tall, fit cross-country runner recalled one of his first days as a Sports Plus coach last year when he girl a high-five and she was upset.

“She didn't come back the next week,” Anderson recalled, noting that many autistic children don't lil He considered writing her father a letter of apology.

After a few weeks, the girl returned.

“And now she gives me high-fives,” Anderson said. “It made me feel good that we crossed that barri

By the numbers

In 1980 there were about 888,705 youth under 19 registered to play soccer in the United States. By 20 had grown to 3.9 million.

Source: U.S. Youth Soccer

To learn more

About Sports Plus, go to www.playsportsplus.org or call 301-452-3781 or e-mail sportsplus@comcast

Indoor multi-sport summer classes for ages 5-11 and 12-14 begin next week at the Victory Youth Cen Darnestown.

About Deaf Pre-Kicks soccer, e-mail Denise Kowalczyk at msdak123@yahoo.com.

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