

HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS NEWS

How Unified Sports changed who gets to belong: ‘They are the best people on the planet’

Updated: Apr. 24, 2026, 8:03 a.m. | Published: Apr. 24, 2026, 6:40 a.m.



Todd Nelson, right, assistant executive director for the New York State Public High School Athletic Association, high-fives a Unified Sports competitor. Submitted photo

By [Lindsay Kramer | lkramer@syracuse.com](mailto:lkramer@syracuse.com)

Syracuse, N.Y. — Todd Nelson had everything a three-sport athlete could want at his small high school 40 minutes east of Lake George — recognition, camaraderie and the buzz that followed varsity athletes everywhere they went.

The competition itself was only part of it. He liked hanging out with teammates at McDonald's stops on bus rides home from away games. Cheers from pep rallies echoed through school halls, pumping up Nelson and his teammates. Even something as simple as a high-five from a fellow student added cheer to his school day.

But amid the noise and attention, a thought stuck with Nelson. Students with intellectual disabilities heard the same music and felt the same school spirit on game days, yet they never had the chance to compete — or to stand at the center of that celebration themselves.

He worried they felt left out.

to be out there in front of my family and friends and peers," Nelson said. "And what I always wondered about is that people don't always get that experience. And I think a lot of us who do get that experience, we take it for granted. These student-athletes who have disabilities, a lot of times, they're in a room down the end of the hallway, and people just hear loud noises coming out of that room. And they don't get to be part of the school culture."

Years later, Nelson would play an integral role in opening those doors for high school athletes in New York state.

Nelson is the assistant executive director for the New York State Public High School Athletic Association. In 2012, he was one of the key movers in bringing Unified Sports to the state. Unified Sports joins high school students with and without intellectual disabilities to compete on the same team.

The program has grown from a pilot program with a dozen schools around the Albany area to 300 basketball and 250 bowling squads across the state.

Amy Simmons, a Unified coach at Chittenango and the Section III chairperson for the activity, said in this section, those numbers now stand at 31 bowling teams (a winter sport) and 25 basketball (a spring sport). All the teams are co-ed.

On Saturday, syracuse.com [will host the first-ever Unified basketball media day](#) at Liverpool High School. Athletes from many of the 25 teams will have their photos taken, be interviewed by sports reporters and create viral videos.

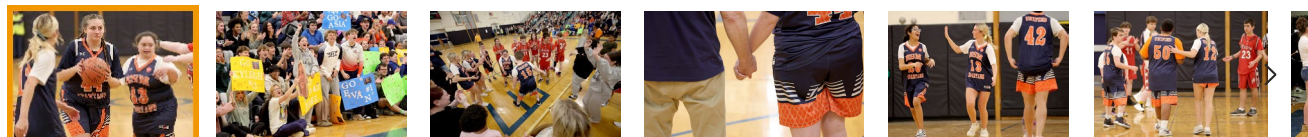
“This is a sport where, win or lose, everyone’s having a good time and that’s just what I like. Just spending time with them is the ultimate goal for me,” said Chittenango varsity athlete Julia McGork, who participates as a partner on the Unified basketball team. “They make my life better in every aspect. To go and hang out with them is like a breath of fresh air. It’s just a very enjoyable experience for me because they are the best people on the planet.”

Nelson earned a master’s degree in adapted physical education and worked as athletic director at Waterville, New Hartford and Herkimer before joining NYSPHSAA in 2008.

In 2012, the federal government sent out a “Dear Colleague” letter to state associations reminding them that schools that received federal funding had to provide individuals with disabilities the opportunity to participate in interscholastic athletics.

That landed right in Nelson’s wheelhouse. A handful of other states had already implemented Unified programs in their schools. So Nelson partnered with Special Olympics to plant the seeds in New York.

“I think I’ve always had a knack for trying to modify things so that everyone can be included,” Nelson said. “So it all just kind of worked together and it just came together perfectly.”



New York State has offered Unified Sports since 2012. Now there are around 300 basketball and 250 bowling teams across the state.

Teams are comprised of players with intellectual disabilities and players without intellectual disabilities. The latter group is called “partners,” and they help keep everyone involved. Participation is rooted in the principle of meaningful involvement, ensuring that every player is allowed to contribute.

“I honestly try to just make sure everyone gets a bucket or everyone at least touches the ball,” said Chittenango’s Gavin Karwoski, a varsity athlete and a partner. “And when we get rebounds, we like to spread it around and make sure everyone gets a chance and has an equal opportunity out there. I think the team is always going to be happy with a win, but I think either way, we’re just having fun and going out there and doing what these guys love to do is a win at the end of the day.”

The basketball split is three athletes and two partners on the court per team. The rules are virtually the same as in varsity basketball.

“We fight this stigma that a lot of people who get involved feel sorry for these kids, and they want them to hear everybody cheer for them,” Nelson said. “So they’ll hand them the ball and then they part like the Red Sea and they let them walk up to the basket and they’re two feet away and they just shoot the ball and they make it.

“And then everybody claps and everybody feels good. And I don’t deny that that’s a good feeling. But we now have reinforced that this student can’t be successful on their own. That’s the important message that we want to get to everybody that’s involved in Unified Sports, that these kids can be successful on their own because all the sports have the exact same rules.”

Participating schools are encouraged to create as immersive an atmosphere as possible through the creation of a Youth Activation Committee. This group helps organize pep rallies and other gameday activities, as well as encourages varsity athletes and other students to attend Unified games. Some programs have dance shows at halftime.

“I like hanging out with all my teammates,” said Chittenango Unified athlete AJ Cullen. “I like all of it. It’s so fun and kind. I’m a happy person. I have a lot of energy. I’m a people person.”

Karwoski, who plays varsity soccer and volleyball for the Bears, indicated that the satisfaction of working with the Unified team matches that gained through his other sports.

“I just love it. I can have a bad day and I can come hang out with these guys, and my day will become so much better,” he said. “And it honestly is just something I enjoy. They’re just always so positive, and no matter what happens, they always have a good attitude.”

Nelson envisions Unified Sports eventually offering a fall activity, perhaps along the lines of modified cross country competition. He also sees the possibility of moving into flag football as well.

“I’m hopefully sending the message that you’re having the opportunity to represent your school and be part of your school community that I think many people took for granted growing up,” he said.

“How special it is to be part of a school community and representing your school and putting on that school uniform, just like you see the football players and just like you see the baseball players or lacrosse or track and field, whoever it may be, you’re putting on the same type of uniform, you’re putting in the work just like they do. And I just want them to know that I’m very proud that I was able to help give them that opportunity.”



Lindsay Kramer

Lindsay Kramer is a general assignment sportswriter for Syracuse.com and The Post-Standard. He has covered CNY colleges, the Syracuse Chiefs/Mets and the Syracuse Crunch. He currently covers high school sports...more

✉ lkramer@syracuse.com ✕
