

Disabled kids keep busy year-round



New SABAH summer program at Riverside rink will expand sports activities

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The Bud Bakewell Rink in Riverside Park is home to youth and high school hockey teams, speedskaters, recreational and sled-hockey players, and the Hasek's Heroes program.

But the rink, near Niagara and Vulcan streets, soon may earn a new reputation as the local mecca for young people with disabilities playing year-round sports, including soccer, lacrosse, field hockey, track and field, and baseball.

It's all due to a three-pronged partnership among the Skating Athletes Bold at Heart (SABAH) program, Hasek's Heroes and the Buffalo Sabres pushing to turn the city-owned rink into the place to be for many young disabled and disadvantaged athletes.

Thanks to a new \$100,000 grant from the Children's Guild Foundation, the well-established SABAH program will add a new program, "Summer Athletes Bold at Heart," on a turf floor starting in May.

"Our vision is to make this a Sportsplex for individuals with special needs," SABAH Executive Director Sheila O'Brien said at the Riverside rink. "We want our kids to have the same opportunities as any typically developing child."

The skating association holds weekly classes for 620 skaters across Western New York, culminating in this year's "SABAH Celebration on Ice" show at 2 p.m. March 27 in HSBC Arena.

Previously, the ice show marked the end of the skating season, which runs from October through March.

"We've heard so many times from teachers and parents that when the season is over, it's so abrupt, and they don't have any program to go to," O'Brien said.

But that will change with the new program.

The Sabres have donated the Buffalo Bandits' old lacrosse turf, which will replace the ice for the summer months.

The program will be run like a special physical education class, with the SABAH kids using adaptive equipment, including a larger soccer ball, a larger lacrosse ball and foam lacrosse sticks.

A huge component of the new program will be the enclosed turf surface.

"Safety's not an issue," O'Brien explained. "The turf is completely flat; sometimes when [these kids] play outside, it's uneven. We shut the rink doors, and they're in a safe, controlled, supportive environment."

The turf field will be used by the roughly 350 young people currently in school-day programs with SABAH. Then over the summer, it also will be used as a regional center for camps, clinics and competitions for people with special needs.

O'Brien cited an advantage for families with several kids, including one with disabilities. When summer rolls around, there often are plenty of camps for able-bodied children but not so many for the disabled.

"Johnny can put on his backpack and say, 'I'm going to soccer camp, too,'" O'Brien said.

Michael T. Lucas and four other teachers at School 45 in Buffalo bring about 30 students, from third through eighth grades, to the SABAH program at Bud Bakewell every Tuesday morning when school's open from October through March.

But the students were disappointed every year when the program ended in March.

"They get a lot of encouragement, a lot of instruction, working one-on-one with an instructor," Lucas said.

The School 45 community-based program involves multiply handicapped children facing a mixture of developmental and physical disabilities.

"When our kids are in gym, they're not the best in kickball or the best in basketball," Lucas said. "The gym teachers do the best they can, but our kids don't have the ability to shine in sports. SABAH is geared specifically for the multiply handicapped child, to bring out the best in all these children."

The new spring and summer program at Bud Bakewell is another byproduct of the 5-year-old partnership among SABAH, Hasek's Heroes and the Sabres.

"This facility and this relationship are really unique," O'Brien said. "Kids with special needs or low socioeconomics are benefiting from this."

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