

Discovering the Healing Power of Athletics

by Karel Juhl

For many of us, athletics presents an enjoyable hobby—coaching a school soccer team, hitting the links on a Sunday afternoon, sweating through an intense racquetball match, or simply relaxing for an evening devoted to football on TV.

To others, athletics throws a lifeline.

Athletes Unlimited

The boy watches intently as the men on the basketball court slam into each other. A quick turnover, a lightning fast pass to a waiting sharpshooter and the Thunderbirds add a three-pointer to their lead.

The Thunderbirds aren't your neighborhood recreational team. For one thing, they're an elite, competitive force, and they've got a national championship to prove it. For another, they play from wheelchairs.

Likewise, the boy watching the tournament play isn't simply a spectator. The 14-year-old recently lost both legs in an accident, and he's witnessing the truth of how full a life he still has before him.

Both—the Thunderbirds and the boy—are examples of the purpose behind Athletes Unlimited, a two-year-old organization in southeastern Michigan founded by Jeff Pierce, DO.

“The primary goal of Athletes Unlimited is to provide social, recreational and athletic outlets to people with disabilities,” Pierce said. “Our guiding philosophy is that life is not intended to be a spectator sport.”

In his practice, Michigan Sports and Spine Center, Pierce deals with both disabled and able-bodied athletes. When he came to Michigan as a sports medicine and rehabilitation physician, he discovered

there were no good avenues for disabled people to get out and play. He modeled Athletes Unlimited after a program he worked with in Chicago, aligning it with the national organization American Athletes With Disabilities.

“I hoped Athletes Unlimited could be an umbrella organization for disabled people,” Pierce said. “If you became disabled or needed some questions answered, you’d think of Athletes Unlimited and we’d put you in the right direction. That’s pretty much starting to happen.”

The Thunderbirds, then based in Ann Arbor, approached Pierce shortly after Athletes Unlimited formed. “They came to me looking for funding and support. It seemed like a perfect match.” They also needed a coach, and Pierce took on the role.

In 1997, the Thunderbirds earned the National Wheelchair Basketball Association tournament championship, coming out on top of 100 teams from across the country. The tournament is patterned after the NCAA, in which 64 teams are invited to compete sectionally, regionally and nationally in a Final Four competition.

“They’re true athletes, to be able to do what they do in a chair.” They are also, Pierce says, living examples of what people with disabilities can accomplish. Which brings him to another goal of Athletes Unlimited: Awareness.

“There’s not really a difference between the able-bodied and disabled, and that’s the message we try and send.” He refers to the boy who lost his legs. “It’s especially hard for the parents of these children, but with a lot of counseling they find their child can still be a great athlete, a great student, can get married and have a family. That’s a tremendous relief to them.”

Athletes Unlimited was one of two organizations behind the successful push to designate April as Spinal Cord Awareness and Disability Month in Michigan. Members of the Thunderbirds and other representatives visit schools and talk about making the right choices—and how the wrong choices can change your life. And they help students learn how to deal with a classmate who becomes disabled.

Volunteers are always needed, but Pierce says one way physicians can help is by making patients aware of Athletes Unlimited and the avenues open to them.

“Everyone, regardless of ability or disability, can benefit from participating in a sport,” Pierce said. “The physical exercise builds strength. The competition builds character. The social interaction builds confidence. All the while, the athletes build hope.”

Ellen's Race

Ellen Osborn was only nine years old when she died following a routine outpatient adenoidectomy. Her death came just two days before Thanksgiving, 1993, and a close-knit neighborhood helped her grieving family through the days that followed.

One of those who helped was Ann Forshee-Crane, a professional race director. "She knew Ellen was a good little athlete," says Ellen's father, Gerald Osborn, DO, acting dean of psychiatry, Michigan State University College of Osteopathic Medicine. "She suggested a race in Ellen's memory that would emphasize care for children and families. It felt a fitting way for us to make something positive out of our family tragedy."

Once Osborn and his wife, Sue, agreed to the race, things happened quickly. A committee made up of people knowledgeable in such events, balanced by the parents of Ellen's closest friends, set to work establishing a course and seeking sponsors. Just eight months later, Ellen's Race was underway in East Lansing.

"That first race was held on what would have been Ellen's tenth birthday, July 24, 1994," Osborn said. "It helped the Osborn family tremendously to get through what would have been a very difficult day."

Professional race consultants who donated their time told the Osborns that a first year turnout of 250 runners for a local race could be considered a roaring success. "That first year there were 650 participants, and it's gone beyond our expectations every year."

Indeed, in just five years Ellen's Race has grown to one of the top ten runs in Michigan, as rated by *Runners World* magazine. Osborn attributes this to community support. "It's not only accepted by the community, but highly anticipated," he said.

Ellen's Race is a flat, figure-8 5K run through the neighborhood where Ellen used to ride her bike, beginning and ending at her elementary school. In 1998, 1,000 runners from Michigan and neighboring states participated.

"We've been able to create a race that has something for everyone," Osborn said. "It has a family orientation, but it's a sanctioned and certified course, so if someone were to set a record it would count in the record books. Elite runners enjoy the course, as do first time joggers and walkers."

For the past two years MSUCOM has served as primary sponsor for Ellen's Race, and Dean Jacobs has pledged the school's support for 1999. MSU Sports Medicine provides coverage by licensed sports

medicine physicians, sports medicine fellows and medical students. Fortunately, the worst injuries have required only bandages.

“We created the course with safety in mind,” Osborn said. “In addition to the 5K run, there’s a one mile fun run primarily for children, and two 400-meter sprints for young children and even toddlers.”

The race benefits Ellen’s elementary school and the local Girl Scouts chapter, another organization important to Ellen. A third beneficiary is Ele’s Place, a haven for grieving children that was very supportive in the initial organization of the race.

Osborn says recycling is another theme of Ellen’s Race, because even as a child “Ellen was passionate about the earth. Runners begin at 9 a.m., and by 2 p.m. you would never know that over 4,000 people had been there, the place is so clean. All trash is sorted for recycling.”

In the years since Ellen’s death, the race established in her memory has helped her family heal. “If ever there has been a success story around an athletic event, this is it,” said Osborn, himself a runner.

“Ellen never missed the Dinosaur Dash, another race organized by Ann Crane. This seemed a fitting memorial to celebrate Ellen’s life and, beyond that, provide the community with something that was positive, family-oriented, health-oriented and represented some of the things that were important to Ellen.”

Health care providers understand and teach the importance of physical activity in maintaining the human body. Physicians such as Gerry Osborn and Jeff Pierce also value its unique ability to heal: Our minds. Our bodies. Our very spirits.

###

Sidebar

To find out more...

Athletes Unlimited, a non-profit organization, relies on community contributions and corporate sponsorships. For information on volunteering, making donations or referring patients, contact:

Athletes Unlimited
PO Box 250942
West Bloomfield, MI 48325
(248) 827-3388
Jeff Pierce, DO

Ellen's Race is held in East Lansing each July, and your tax-deductible contributions benefit Pinecrest Elementary School, Michigan Capitol Girl Scouts, and Ele's Place. For information, contact:

Ellen's Race
1313 Basswood Circle
East Lansing, MI 48823
(517) 351-5573
ellensrace@aol.com
Gerry Osborn, DO, and Sue Granger-Osborn