

# A special program for special people

## Challenge Soccer Program and its volunteers help special needs children stay active in sports

By BRIAN CUNNIFF  
Staff Writer

MARMORA – Daryl and Jen DiTroia wanted to introduce sports to their son, Cameron, so they enrolled him in a youth soccer program. Cameron, however, who is autistic, had difficulty competing.

“We always wanted to keep Cameron involved in sports so we signed him up in mainstream soccer but it just didn’t work out,” Daryl says. “It had nothing to do with the coaches or the other kids, because they were all great. It was just that he couldn’t keep up.”

District’s special education program, began the Challenger Soccer Program, a six-week instructional soccer clinic for special needs children that meets each Sunday through the end of this month on the grounds behind Trinity United Methodist Church on Route 9 in Marmora.

“They have that Fields of Dreams baseball program for special needs kids up in Absecon and that was the design I wanted to take to try to get this going,” Daryl says. “They do baseball up in Absecon, so I wanted to try to do soccer here. Upper Township is a big soccer community so it

Van Drew to try to create a government-funded afterschool program for special needs children.

“I feel bad for (Will) because he has a brother and sister who both play sports but he comes home after school and just sits and waits for them to come home,” Mullock says. “That’s why I really want to see an afterschool program get started. Jeff Van Drew has been such a big help but the biggest issue is how to fund it.”

Mullock says she is thankful her son has the opportunity to play in the Challenger Soccer Program.

“This is the way it should be for these kids,” she says. “I see how the volunteers are dedicated, like all the kids from Wildwood Catholic, and they get as much out of it as the kids.”

Jess Frusca, 16, a student at Ocean City High School, enjoys watching her brother, Derek, 13, play in the program.

“I think it’s great that he can get out and enjoy a sport,” Frusca says. “My brother and I both do sports so to see him do it is a lot of fun.”

DiDonato, the Upper Township special education administrator, joined forces with the DiTroias and the Upper Township Recreation Department to help get Challenger Soccer Program going.

“Daryl came to me as a parent and met with me and the people from the rec department, but this is primarily his doing,” DiDonato says, attempting to deflect credit. “We just got the info out for him. He has done an unbelievable job putting this together.”

Aside from all of the hard work done by a handful of organizers, the program wouldn’t flourish without the volunteers.

“The kids from Wildwood Catholic were a savior,” DiTroia says. “Their coach (Mike Saioni) ... his wife, (Katie), is a special education teacher in Upper and that’s how they got involved. We were under pressure, kind of running late to get enough volunteers to get it going and they stepped up and really helped us out. Every kid on the team comes up here and helps out.”

Saioni says his players have gotten more out their roles as volunteers than he first envisioned.

“I try to tell our kids all the time that there’s a lot more to life than soccer,” Saioni says. “When our kids went up there for the first time, they realized immediately they are so incredibly blessed and so fortunate to be able to play the way they do and that some children and people have to go through their lives



photo courtesy Kate Moffatt

Wildwood Catholic’s McKenzie Scott and Annie Mullock receive a hug from Annie’s son, Will, during a break in the action.

An idea began to hatch in Daryl’s mind, and with the help of other parents of special needs children, some very hard-working special education teachers and administrators in the Upper Township school system, the Upper Township Recreation Department and the volunteer work of players from three local high school soccer programs, Cameron and a couple dozen other special needs children from all parts of Cap May County now have a place all their own to play soccer.

The DiTroias, with immense help from Bob DiDonato, who supervises the Upper Township School

made a lot of sense to try to do something like this here.”

Each Sunday morning for about an hour, special needs children take the field – along with their ‘buddy,’ or volunteer, who is assigned to each child – to learn and play the game of soccer. Many of the volunteers include players from the Ocean City High School boys and girls soccer teams and other OCHS athletes, as well as the entire boys soccer team at Wildwood Catholic High School.

Daryl DiTroia and his staff of volunteers lead the children in a series of drills, allowing them to kick around a soccer ball, learn different aspects of the game, interact with others and meet new friends.

“This is fantastic,” says Kate Moffatt, a Palermo resident whose son, Patrick, 10, is one of Challenger Soccer Program’s players. “My son is making a lot of friends and he just loves his ‘buddy.’ It’s great for socialization, he’s learning a new sport and learning how to do things on the field.”

Annie Mullock, a West Cape May resident, smiles brightly as she watches her son, Will, who has Down syndrome, ham it up on the field with Wildwood Catholic goalkeeper McKenzie Scott during a break in the action.

“Look how awesome this is,” Mullock beams.

Mullock says she has been working with state senator Jeff



Brian Cuniff

David Caracciolo takes a drink from his water bottle as he dribbles the ball as his ‘buddy,’ Wildwood Catholic soccer player Jake Martin, watches from behind.

Brian Cuniff

Daryl DiTroia (center), who organized and developed the Challenger Soccer Program, and Wildwood Catholic soccer player M.J. Nestor (far right) help Joey Parral along as Austin Williams (far left) kicks the ball forward during a drill.

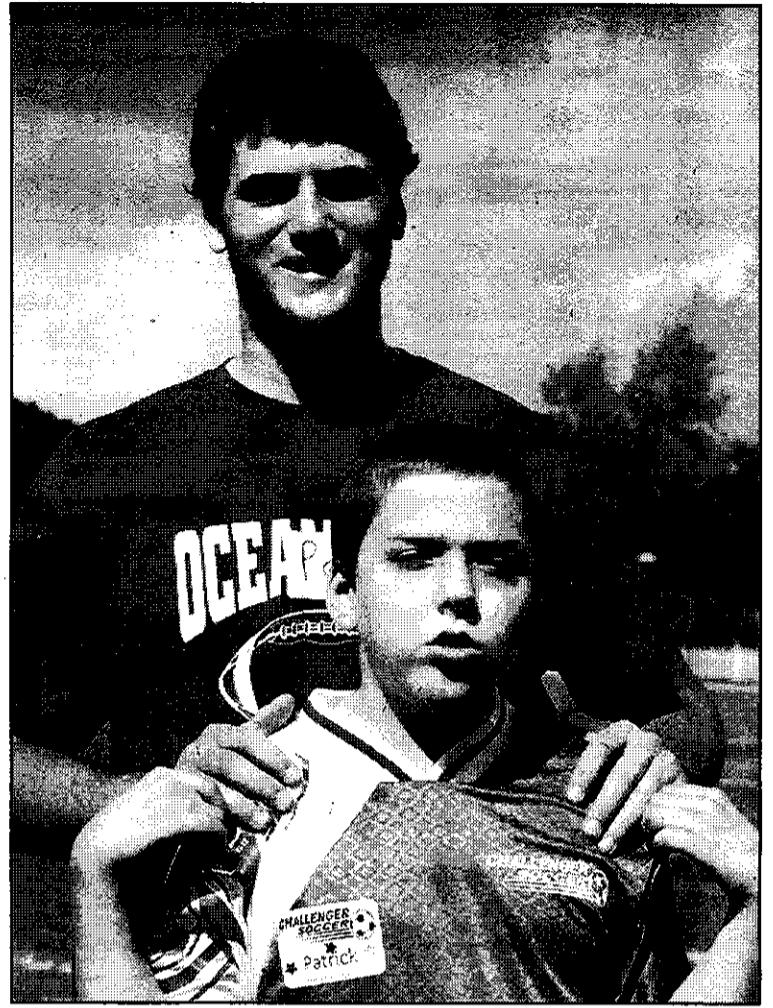


photo courtesy Kate Moffatt

Patrick Moffatt, 10, a player in the Challenger Soccer Program, poses with his ‘buddy,’ Pat Kimball of the Ocean City High School football team.

in an entirely different situation. They go in there and just love bringing smiles to the kids’ faces and helping give them the opportunity to do something that they’re able to do every day. I can tell our guys approach each day feeling privileged and lucky to be able to do what they do. Not one of them doesn’t look forward to going up there and helping out. It’s well worth doing and it’s been fantastic for our kids. They’re representing themselves and the program and our school in the highest esteem.”

One of Wildwood Catholic’s players, senior Kyle Raucci, has a unique perspective on the program. His older brother, Doug, who had Down syndrome, passed away at age 20 a few years ago.

“This is a nice reminder of what I used to have with my brother,” Raucci says. “I was excited just to get involved. It’s fun being around these kids and seeing how much fun they’re having.”

Ocean City High School boys soccer coach Aaron Bogushefsky says

he jumped at the chance to get his players involved because, like Raucci, he also has first-hand experience with a special needs child.

“(OCHS athletic director) Chris Lentz first told me about (Challenger Soccer) and I was immediately interested because my girlfriend’s brother has Down syndrome,” Bogushefsky says. “It’s a terrific program. It’s great for everybody involved. I’ll never forget seeing the reaction of our kids that first day. I think it benefits them as much as the kids they’re working with. We are really grateful for the opportunity.”

Even more grateful are the children who get the chance to play a sport they’ve watched other children their age play regularly.

“Cameron loves playing with his friends and he loves putting on the jersey knowing he’s coming out here to play,” Daryl DiTroia says. “He loves wearing his jersey and putting on his cleats. After the first time out here, he was so happy that when he got home he didn’t want to take anything off.”

