

Rocky Mountain News

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Suns team shines in face of disability

By Jolie Breeden, Rocky Mountain News

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Olivia Urbalejo loves to be thrown in the air.

She's a flyer, a top person on her squad, an All Star cheerleader with tons of spirit. She also spends the majority of her time in a wheelchair.

Olivia, an 8-year-old with cerebral palsy, and 11 other children with conditions that range from autism to Down syndrome have come together to form the Cheer Central Suns, one of only two special-needs All Star teams in Colorado.

The Suns offer an opportunity for kids with disabilities to shine at All Star cheerleading, and the team is rising to the occasion. As members bounce like popcorn in hot oil across the cheer floor, the Suns are as practiced as any other team, and their routine is just as demanding.

"I know the kids and the parents; that's what they want," said Sybil Cummin, who has coached the team since it formed two years ago. "They want it to look as much like our other routines as possible."

For Cummin, learning how to coach the team has been a process of trial and error. Although Cheer Central worked closely with Peak Athletics Plus, which created the first Colorado special-needs team about the same time, there was really no blueprint for the best way to train. But working together, they found their groove.

"In the formation of the team, we just tried to figure it out," Cummin said. "I was more nervous about what they could do and how far I could push them. I found out I can expect a lot from them and that they want to do more. They want to be challenged."

The team, which will be performing at Saturday's Rocky Jam, includes all the usual All Star elements in its routine - tumbling, dance and even stunts. The only differences: The pace is slower and coaches spot team members when necessary.

But there are other differences, too, like how close the team has become.

"They are so compassionate with one another," Cummin said. "If someone isn't there at practice, they worry about them."

That makes it especially difficult when one of them can't participate, like Olivia who will be leaving for several weeks to have surgery.

"The hardest part is saying goodbye to my team," she said. "My team is very important to me."

Because the families of special-needs children often have high expenses related to medical care, Cheer Central has set up a nonprofit fundraising organization to help make participation in the Suns more affordable. The money collected is used for the costs of uniforms, travel expenses, gym tuition and event registration fees.

Tax-deductible donations can be made to: Colorado Suns with Special Needs, P.O. Box 1745, Broomfield, CO 80038. Or contact Evette Blea at 720-217-9538.

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