

Special Needs

Outstanding Growth for Extraordinary Athletes

Did you know there is one area of all-star cheer that could potentially see its growth double from last season to the next? It's with special needs teams. As of late spring, there were more than 70 teams around the country, and this summer there are about 50 more starting up. With explosive numbers like these, the U.S. All-Star Federation's (USASF) special needs committee is well on its way to reaching its goal of increasing the total number of teams to 140 by the end of the year.

Bill Presson, committee director, says that's not the only goal. "We want to create a uniform set of rules and categories of competition. We also want to develop a special needs credentialing and certification program for coaches," he says.

Part of that begins with educating the industry on what exactly the USASF defines as "special needs." Presson says, "We are talking about athletes with an intellectual disability. It's OK if they have some physical disability *in addition* to the intellectual disability. By intellectual disability, we use the same definition used by the World Health Organization, which has been adopted by Special Olympics."

Long-Term Athletes

There is great potential for special needs athletes to stay in the sport longer. Says Mary Fehrenbach, committee member, "The special needs division does not have an upper age limit. Many athletes in the 21 to 45 and higher age bracket are currently participating around the country, and we would love to see more."

Increased participation is a huge success of the past year, but the committee is not one to rest on its laurels. "To really make an impact, we need to continue [to grow]," Presson says. "I've been speaking at coaches conferences around the country and have found that gyms want to start teams, but need a 'kick start,' so we've been working on packaging

and disseminating as much information as possible. By the end of the summer, we plan to expand the USASF web section for special needs teams."

Development

There are other areas of expansion that the all-star industry should be aware of. "We're trying very hard to get competition companies and gyms the information they need to create a successful special needs division or team," Presson says. Over the past five years, this division has grown from no participants to one of the most anticipated groups at any competition. "As we grow from one team to 50 and then 500 teams, the key is to make each aspect sustainable. No part of the link (participant/gym/uniform company/cosmetic company/competition company) can afford to bear the complete financial burden. We all know there are costs in doing anything, no matter how noble the cause. We've built the basics of a model to provide the needed support, but we still have some important blocks to add," he says.

Community and industry outreach can fuel the success of special needs teams. Many people are already helping at the grass roots level, giving to local programs. "It may be [in the form of] time as a volunteer coach, money as a participant or team sponsor, goods by a sporting goods store, or even TV/radio/newspaper space by a local media outlet. Often educational or medical professionals will pass along flyers to potentially interested families. Other cheerleaders in the gym will almost unanimously want to assist the new team



in learning jumps, stunts and tumbling as well," Presson says.

Further Goals

Other goals for the next year are similar to any growing business. "We want to create a multi-pronged marketing program to advance our mission for special needs including competitions, starting programs, national public relations campaign, et cetera. We also strive to promote the special needs programs nationally and attract funding sources, such as scholarships, grants, loans and sponsors," Presson says. With burgeoning growth matched only by the industry's desire to help, reaching these goals—and others—is a very realistic one.

SPECIAL NEEDS COMMITTEE MEMBER PROMOTED

Last April, Dr. Richard Rafes, a member of the USASF Special Needs Committee, was named president of East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma. Rafes, a founding member of the USASF, has been instrumental in guiding the organization toward its mission with his organizational knowledge and legal expertise. Additionally, Rafes' daughters have been involved in all-star cheerleading and, coupled with his deep concern for those with special needs, he has made a strong commitment to this sport via the USASF.