

Sharks test waters with new team

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(Aug 31, 2006)

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water, there's a new school of sharks circling.

And these Sharks are the first of its kind in Canada, according to team director Alana Potter. The Cambridge Cheersport Sand Sharks will take to the floor on Sept. 17 and they will become the first intellectually and physically challenged team in the country.

Potter said she saw a "special needs" team compete at a tournament in the U.S. and figured it would be something unique to bring to this area. But with only one person signed up so far - the minimum they will start a team with is four - the Sand Sharks may be beached for the time being.

"We're having a tough time getting the word around in the community, but we're really hoping to get this going," Potter said.

"But it's amazing to see these (athletes) come together and have success. Just to see their reaction afterwards when they finished their routine. It was exciting."

When the team does get going, Potter said she will be the coach, but will get help from Connie Franklin, who works with special needs children. In addition, senior Shark teammates said they would help out when needed.

"There's been tons of interest. The senior teams want to come to practice and have a hand in this as well. While this is a special team, it's really an extension of our program," she said.

Though registration for the Sand Sharks is a little slow, Potter said the ideal amount of cheer squad members would be eight, with a maximum of 12. The team - which will be from age eight and up - will perform three demonstrations this season, with the first being the Flygirl Competition in December in Mississauga. The sign up fee is \$50.

While Potter said the team is open to males or females with intellectual or physical disabilities, the person must be able to participate in an hour-long practice and have average gross motor skills.

"I think any new sports team will take some time to get going though," Potter said.

Once the team gets more experience and works together longer, Potter said they will compete in the U.S. against other special needs teams. The bonus, she said, is that entry fees are free in the U.S. for special needs teams.

"The Sharks family is really excited to get this new team started," Potter said.

"I really feel that this is a great way to learn important concepts like teamwork and commitment, as well as build friendships and relationships. The original team we saw was happy to compete and I think we can achieve that here too."

The final Sharks registration date is Sept. 8 from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Shark Tank, 50 Fleming Dr. unit 4, just off of Sheldon Drive. But Potter said that registration will be extended only for the Sand Sharks if they require more athletes for the team.

In addition, a new Shark Tank will be opening in November on Thompson Drive, around the corner from the current facility.

The new cheer gym will be 6,000-square-feet - double the size of the current tank - so more than one team can practice routines, and there will be more practice equipment and a multi-purpose room.

"We had to do this. We're busting at the seams," Potter said.