



American Association of Adapted Sports Programs, Inc. (AAASP) Celebrates Giving the Gift of Interscholastic Sports this Holiday Season in its 25th Anniversary Year!

Born out of the 1996 Atlanta Paralympics, AAASP celebrates 25 years of providing young people with disabilities the opportunity to play competitive sports and live healthy active lifestyles!

Atlanta, December 8, 2021 – As 2021 comes to a close this month, the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs, Inc. (AAASP) celebrates our 25th anniversary this holiday season of the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP) bringing interscholastic wheelchair sports to students with physical disabilities. Born out of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic games, AAASP is looking back proudly at our efforts over the last 25 years in getting these students off the sidelines and into the game. Since its inception in 1996, over 7000 student-athletes (from 2490 schools) have participated in nearly 2200 AAASP interscholastic wheelchair sports competitions. The AAASP cooperative approach with national, state, and local educational agencies, represents one of the most successful models for affording students with physical disabilities access to competitive sport.

AAASP moves into this next era with new leadership at the helm, promoting COO and Co-Founder, Tommie Storms, to new Executive Director. Storms replaces long time Executive Director and Co-Founder, Bev Vaughn, who retired in September. “We are proud of the many milestones we have achieved in shaping the world of interscholastic wheelchair sports over the last 25 years,” said Storms. “We are excited about the future of interscholastic adapted sports, and look forward to continuing and expanding our commitment to help improve the health and well-being of students with physical disabilities through competitive school based sports.”

AAASP recently launched a new user-friendly website with improved navigation and functionality. Created in partnership with MLT Creative, this upgrade allows users to quickly and easily navigate the site to stay informed and up-to-date on the latest AAASP programs, news and information. Check it out at: www.adaptedsports.org.

AAASP, in conjunction with History Associates, is currently finishing up a digital timeline to celebrate AAASP’s 25th Anniversary and creating AAASP’s Commemorative Collection permanent archives. Athletes, coaches, supporters and others involved have been submitting their stories to help tell the history of 25 years with Adapted Sports! The letters and photos in our archives from over the past 25 years, as well as those submitted this year, will be made into a commemorative piece as well. (It’s not too late for submissions – others can submit stories to 25@adaptedsports.org or visit <https://adaptedsports.org/25th-anniversary-commemorative-collection/> for more information.)

As a part of the 25th anniversary celebration, AAASP launched an Alumni Association to support and engage a network of former AAASP student athletes as brand ambassadors and to help continue to transform lives and athletes. In October, AAASP hosted its annual Adapted Sports Programs in Recreation and Education (ASPIRE) Awards ceremony virtually on Facebook LIVE. The ASPIRE Awards recognize and honor athletes, coaches, influencers and organizations for their outstanding contributions to support student athletes with physical disabilities. Visit: <http://adaptedsports.org/aspire-award/> for a list of those nominated and the recipients of each award, as well as upcoming programs for 2022!

The American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP), headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia since 1996, has developed one of the nation’s most comprehensive school-based athletic programs for children with physical disabilities attending grades 1-12. Many prominent individuals and national organizations in the industry have recognized AAASP as the model for the nation. For more information about AAASP, please visit our website at www.adaptedsports.org or join our conversations on Facebook (American Association of Adapted Sports Programs), Twitter or Instagram at: @AdaptedSports.

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HISTORY SHEET

2021 marked the 25th years of the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs – the governing body for interscholastic adapted sports in the state of Georgia. As we celebrate this important milestone, we are compelled to share the story of how we got where we are today – and want to thank the pioneers who blazed the trail for the student athletes that are now moving from sport to sport each season to keep active and enjoy competitive interscholastic play in wheelchair handball, basketball and football.

Here is a quick look back at how it all started here in Georgia:

In the shadow of the 1996 Atlanta Paralympic Games, DeKalb County School System and their coordinator, therapeutic recreation specialist, Ms. Beverly Vaughn, were discovered to be responsible for a hidden gem. Their Adapted Sports Program at Margaret Harris High School boasted over 75 students with physical or visual impairments *competing in sport*. Here, bussed from around the district, girls and boys in grades 1-12, representing over 40 forms of physical disability, met to play wheelchair basketball or team handball, after school. A track and field meet – the Victory Games - drawing over 200 local and regional participants, was also run by Ms. Vaughn and DeKalb in the spring.

The Atlanta Paralympic Organizing Committee dubbed the program, “The Model for the Nation” and today, it is celebrated as one of the legacies of those Games. But, at the time, what Dekalb lacked to look *exactly* like any other sports program at any other school, was another school-based adapted sports team – even one - to play their multiple teams. We also wanted more able-bodied fans from all the schools in the stands.

Ms. Vaughn and I, a Dekalb volunteer, music business professional and radio personality (WFOX, WSB), were determined this must change. Why couldn't “inclusion” look like this? Girls' sports. Boys' sports. Adapted Sports. All were designed for the specific abilities and needs of their group. So, why couldn't each be celebrated as full participants in the athletic offerings of their school system?

We resolved to create an athletic association, the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP), devoted solely to expansion of opportunities for physically disabled (PD) students and the creation of standardization in adapted sports. AAASP would model itself almost exactly as state high school associations and the NCAA – a cooperating membership of school systems and educational institutions in sport. In so doing, we found our lane and life's work.

On this, our 25th Anniversary, AAASP celebrates its over 7000 seasonal participants in Georgia since 1996, hosting more than 2200 local and state interscholastic competitions. It offered the nation's first cross-disability trainings to over 2000 coaches and officials in interscholastic adapted sports, with courses now offered, free and online, through its program partner, the National Federation of State High School Associations. Some 210 schools in Georgia have had participants in AAASP team sports (wheelchair team handball, wheelchair basketball and wheelchair football) and PD students in every county and district have access to track and field participation through the AAASP/Georgia High School Association (GHSA) Alliance, formed in 2001.

Make no mistake. This is still almost entirely unheard of in other states – local access to regularly offered, academically tethered sport opportunities for their PD student. Nor is this merely another inspiring story of the human spirit. *This is institutional and societal change in a sustainable form.* These students' letter in



their sport, receive state championship titles through AAASP/GHSA. The media treats them as athletes and their games as “real sports.” There were 15 high school graduates from the Georgia programs last year, five of whom received either an academic or athletic scholarship to attend college, but nearly all pursuing higher education.

AAASP Athletes have historically graduated at a rate averaging 88%, while 52% is the national average for these kids. Our ground-breaking work is recognized by the Ford Foundation, the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University; United Way’s IMPACT Award; Tommy Nobis Program Award; Perimeter College’s MLK Corporate Humanitarian Award. AAASP is a two-time national program award recipient from the nations’ largest membership of physical educators and programmers in rehabilitation and sport (AAHPERD, now called SHAPE). (In truth, there is a long list representing an embarrassment of riches in accolades.) And yet...

According to the US Department of Education and many researchers, those still sidelined from such gifts of health and inclusion, the sense of belonging sports participation at school can provide - remain two or three times as likely to be bullied, become a pregnant teen, attempt or succeed in suicide or drop out of school.

We can do more. YOU can do more. Let that child or family who may be eligible know that the Georgia Department of Education, AAASP and GHSA remain determined as partners in this cause to make a difference in the lives of these athletes. We have a winning formula that must continue to build a winning team of superintendents, principles, teachers, coaches, officials, donors and sponsors.

Visit adaptedsports.org to learn how you can help transform lives and athletics through AAASP and help us celebrate what we have already achieved together. Give the gift of sports to all this holiday season!

Tommie Storms
Executive Director, Cofounder