



New Year, New Emphasis on Education, New Online Exhibit Confronting Lack of Awareness Sidelining Disabled Students

Atlanta, January 27, 2023 – This year marks the 50th anniversary of the passing of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* and the 10th anniversary of the *Dear Colleague Letter*, issued by the Civil Rights Division of the US Department of Education. The Letter clarified for our schools, their role and responsibility to include students with disabilities in sports programs at school. The Letter simultaneously noted, however, that resources including funding, training, and successful models were needed for schools to be able to step up to meet these needs.

The 2013 Letter made national news, and as its implications were explored, one organization was consistently pointed to as a potential answer. Because it was already addressing every challenge - the Atlanta-based, **American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP)**. A legacy of the 1996 Atlanta Paralympic Games.

Unfortunately, even as these important milestones are marked, too many educators and the general public remain completely unaware of advances in this work or this significantly innovative and unique organization. Nor are they taking advantage of the resources made available to them in serving their students with physical disabilities.

As one of the two legacies born of the Atlanta Paralympic Games, AAASP– is the nation’s first (and still only) **education-based** interscholastic athletic association - envisioned and established as a membership of schools, school districts and state high school associations, joining together to provide a standardized approach to adapted sports programs to students with physical disabilities at school.

Remembering What Has Been Forgotten

In 1996, adults and young people without disabilities, inspired by the Atlanta Olympics, were inspired to dream, to take up a sport they hadn’t tried. Gyms across the state swirled with new participants.

Adults and young people with *physical disabilities* were equally inspired. They entertained the same dreams with the same feelings of anticipation and excitement. The only difference is that they had no place to go. No school programs save one in DeKalb County, Georgia. No adult programs or youth, save one or two, sponsored by a community group or a local hospital. How was that possible in a state with an estimated 4,000 eligible students in grades 1-12, alone at the time?

That all changed with the creation of the two legacies in that Olympic Games – the education-school-based programs of AAASP (AdaptED Sports), a completely unique undertaking for its time - and Blaze Sports, for adults and children, working with the parks and recreation departments and professional sports organizations, as has been and remains the most common approach to providing programs to the disabled.

But, what of now? While programs are more plentiful and made fully a part of the athletic offerings in numerous counties, parents and even many school boards and teachers are unaware of this service for their students. The result is that these populations, plagued by high dropout rates and secondary illness and surgeries related directly to their sedentary lifestyles (often paid taxpayers through government health programs) are sidelined by that lack of awareness. The 1996 Olympic and Paralympic Games were held in Atlanta over 25 years ago. There are adults raising their own families, who weren’t even born then. Those who were a part of that amazing experience have forgotten about many of the triumphs and challenges of those Paralympic Games, spotlighted for the public as millions were poured into promotion, research, and programmatic efforts. Over 70,000 people were also trained as volunteers and carried the knowledge and awareness, now hard to find, with them to their communities.

Cofounder and Executive Director, Tommie Storms, says it is an ongoing and highly challenging issue that people today remain generally unaware or misinformed over what these populations need, want, and can do successfully as disabled athletes. “Even in our own community of national disability sport organizations, others have to frequently be reminded or informed for the first time, that AAASP is an *education-based organization* among the 99.9% of other organizations and programs that are community-based. It’s the difference between a church, parks, YMCA or community-organized team and the local football team at the high school. Our athletes

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participate in locally-held, school-sponsored, local games against other school teams of the same composition, playing under the same set of rules with interscholastic officials also trained and placed by the organization. Our kids letter in their sport, have their scores announced at school, even participate in the high school basketball championships which this year again will be televised.” They’ve also been awarded college scholarships to play wheelchair sports, and a few have even become Paralympians.

Introducing a Three-Part Awareness and Resources Campaign

For these reasons, AAASP is introducing a three-part awareness and training campaign.

First, AAASP is reintroducing its logo to emphasize the “ED” in adapted and will begin referring to itself more often as **AdaptED Sports**, rather than AAASP. Starting NOW. **AdaptED Sports**, is the only program of its kind due to its approach and local application capabilities. So, adding the **ED** emphasis is intended to help others understand its position as the distinguished option in the education world.

Second, in order to drive home the significant history surrounding the contributions the organization and its supporters have made to athletics in education, and the outstanding accomplishments of its graduates, **AdaptED Sports** has created an immersive, online exhibit. This digital archive includes photos, stories, and videos from over 25 years of programming and advocacy and touches on the “firsts” and the tremendous volume of accolades and awards that are unique to **AdaptED Sports**.

Working with the historians and archivists at History Associates, Inc., **AdaptED Sports** has compiled the history of disability and adapted sports, with a focus on Atlanta. It explores the stories, the deficits that existed everywhere and how they’ve been addressed.

Third, **AdaptED Sports** will utilize the next 12 months, in cooperation with its partners and friends at the NFHS, NIAAA, the Georgia Regional Education Resources Agency (RESA), the Georgia High School Association (GHSA) and others to engage, educate and bring awareness to the need to find, inspire, train and include these populations in school-based, interscholastic sports.

The American Association of AdaptED Sports (AAASP) just celebrated its 25th year in Georgia as the infrastructure (similar to the Georgia High School Association (GHSA) or NCAA,) that makes it possible for school systems and school co-ops to implement and sustain programs in adapted athletics, health and fitness in a league format, each adhering to the same policies, standards and guidelines for competition. AdaptED Sports Students practice weekly with games held on Saturday in each of the 3 ten- week seasons that include wheelchair handball (Fall) , wheelchair basketball (Winter) and wheelchair football (Spring). Through the AAASP/GHSA Alliance, state championships follow each sport season and these students are afforded the same standings and titles as their non-disabled peers. (*AAASP differs from Special Olympics in that its athletes do not have a cognitive impairment, only a physical disability. Participants in Special Olympics must have an IQ of 70 or below to be eligible.*) To learn more about AAASP, please visit: <https://adaptedsports.org> .

The American Association of AdaptED Sports Programs (AAASP), headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, is a not-for-profit association dedicated to developing interscholastic adapted sports programs in partnership with national, state, and local educational agencies. It represents a standardized approach to extracurricular adapted team sports and has developed one of the nation's most comprehensive school-based athletic programs for students with physical disabilities attending elementary, middle or high school. For more information, please visit our website at <http://adaptedsports.org> or join our conversations on Twitter at: @AdaptEDSports.

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Contacts: Tommie Storms, AdaptED Sports – tstorms@adaptedsports.org

Atlanta: Terri Grunduski, Grunduski Group – terri@grunduskigroup.com 404-226-7497

Donna Fezell, Grunduski Group – donna@grunduskigroup.com 404-290-1929