

Pine-Richland's Unified bocce ball team fosters high school engagement, community

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COURTESY OF TRACEY SETTEMBRINO

photos Courtesy of Tracey Settembrino Pine-Richland's Unified bocce team allows students with disabilities to partner with students without disabilities and play against other schools.

A packed student section, excited cheerleaders and supportive signs filled a Pine-Richland gymnasium.

The fans weren't there to support the high school's basketball team or volleyball team — but its Unified bocce ball team.

The district's inaugural bocce season kicked off in 2021. The team, which is part of the Special Olympics Interscholastic Unified Sports program, gives students with disabilities and without disabilities the opportunity to compete against other schools in the region as their classmates cheer them on.

"It really allows the whole student population to come together as one," said Tracey Settembrino, an autism support teacher at the district's high school. "That's the mission of the whole school engagement aspect of being a Unified school."

Pine-Richland joined the Unified Sports program last year after a two-year wait.

Settembrino, who serves as a bocce coach, said bocce is just component of Pine-Richland's stance as a Unified school. The high school also offers programs that foster youth leadership and school engagement.

There are currently 26 Unified schools in Allegheny County and 300 participating schools across Pennsylvania. Right now, Pine-Richland only offers Unified bocce, but other schools in the state also offer Unified soccer and Unified track and field.

The bocce team partners students with disabilities, called athletes, with students without disabilities, called partners, to compete in matches. The athlete-partner duo remains together throughout the season.

Leah Martin, a Pine-Richland junior who plays on the team as a partner, said she and her athlete are now good friends with a one-on-one connection after the 2021 season.

The pair planned out their strategies during matches together, she said.

"When we were playing against other teams, it never crossed my mind this is a Special Olympics event," Martin said. "It's just like any other sport."

During the 2021 season, Pine-Richland placed fifth in a regional competition. Martin is hopeful that the upcoming season will be even more of a success.

"This year I think we're going to come back a lot stronger," Martin said. "We want (the team) to have a Pine-Richland authenticity as a sport."

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