

All Abilities Welcome!

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Did you know that April is not only National Volunteer Month but it is also National Autism Awareness Month? Are you wondering what the connection is to ODP? Well as you all know, the Olympic Development Program is one avenue in which high-caliber soccer players have benefitted from high-level coaching, training and experiences within the soccer world that have helped them excel both on and off the field. We are very proud of all the success our ODP players have continued to have through the years so we'd like to place a challenge before them.

Here at NCYSA, we strive to help our member associations create the ideal environment for all our youth, no matter their ability, to grow and excel through soccer to be successful in life. One of the programs that helps us do this is USYS's TOPSoccer Program. The NCYSA staff assists local associations with administering this valuable program in their area of the state. TOPSoccer is a community-based training and team placement program for athletes of all ages with mental and/or physical disabilities (such as autism, Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy) who want to play soccer that is orchestrated and run strictly by volunteers. Athletes who can benefit from the TOPSoccer program are all around us; a lot of them make up our biggest fan base cheering their siblings on from the sidelines instead of participating themselves. We would like to challenge our ODP players to get involved with their local TOPSoccer program and help give back to their community so that all our youth can learn skills through soccer to help them excel in life.

To give us a clearer picture into how you could use your soccer skills to give back, I interviewed Kevin Flynn, who has had the privilege to be a part of both worlds as a player, coach and educator. Coach Flynn, who completed his USSF "E" license here in North Carolina, coaches in the NYC area and has worked in special education for the past 5 years, specifically with individuals with autism. He currently holds a BA in Adolescent Education from SUNY Cortland and will graduate next month with a MS in Special Education from Queens College. Upon graduation, he will finish the process of becoming a Behavior Analyst eager to tie both worlds together by working directly with players, families and coaches to use behavioral principles and applied behavior analysis teaching tactics to increase player performance and motivation at every level of the game. Coach Flynn had this to say:

"Individuals with autism and other disabilities often have limited social relationships due to issues with communication, initiating social interaction and maintaining engagement in non-preferred activities. Programs like TOPSoccer are designed to give these individuals the chance to participate in sports in a fun, development-centered environment, while also increasing self-esteem, social skills and other important life skills. These programs also help highlight each individual's abilities and helps them feel part of a team. Working with individuals with disabilities is an extremely rewarding experience. It allows you to form unique bonds with people and help them achieve things that they never thought they could do!"

I have had the honor of volunteering as a member of the medical staff team at the Special Olympics for many years and I can't put into words the joy and heart-warming feeling you receive in return. To become involved in TOPSoccer, you do not have to have any previous experience working with people with disabilities; just that desire to want to give back, have fun and meet some awesome new friends! The local associations in NC who offer TOPSoccer programs can be found on the TOPSoccer page of the NCYSA Recreation website or please contact me at odp@ncsoccer.org and I'd be happy to connect you.

Resources:

- USYS TopSoccer – <https://www.usyouthsoccer.org/programs/topsoccer/>
- NCYSA TopSoccer - <https://www.ncsoccer.org/topsoccer>