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## Camp Abilities turns teens who are blind into athletes

Teens who are blind savored the thrill of competition and proved you don't need to see to enjoy sports.

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For five days in April, a group of teenagers with visual impairments improved their fitness, discovered the joys of competition, and proved that people who are blind can enjoy sports as much as their sighted peers.

The 15 high school students attended Camp Abilities, a program that offers a wide range of [sports and recreational activities](#) adapted for people who are blind or visually impaired.

On Perkins campus in Watertown, the students participated in goalball, tandem biking, tennis, track events and tabletop sports. Off-campus activities included trampolining and rock climbing.

## Camp Abilities Boston photo album

“For some of these kids, they’ve never played sports before,” said Megan O’Connell, Camp Abilities Boston coordinator and adaptive physical education teacher in the [Secondary Program](#). “So we’re showing them the games, teaching them the skills to play and instilling confidence in them. And they’re around peers who are the same, sharing in a blindness or visual impairment.”

For each sport, Camp Abilities staffers explained the rules, helped the teens practice and then arranged competitions for individuals and teams.

## Let’s play goalball

One of the most popular sports was [goalball](#), where players score points by rolling a ball with embedded bells past opponents. Every member of the three-person teams wore a blindfold, so participants with some usable vision didn’t have an unfair advantage.

In a showdown between the Spatriots and the King Cobras, Nick, 17, dived to the ground to block the jangling ball with his body. The Attleboro High School senior then grabbed the ball, leaped to his feet and quickly rolled the ball back in the direction of his three opponents, who listened intently as they stood guarding their goal on the opposite side of the gym.

On more than one occasion, Nick’s up-tempo play caught his opponents off-guard, and his fast-moving ball cracked the human wall they scrambled to form along the floor.

“Goalball is really fast-paced,” he said. “Yet, there was no stress playing. Usually, when I’m playing something like kickball, I have to worry about looking for the ball.”

In this game and others, the teens learned that competition is not just about winning—it’s also about being a good sport and having fun.

When Chloe, 13, heard a goalball opponent stop her rolling ball before it crossed the goal line, she applauded the effort, even though it cost her team a potential point.

Later, on the sideline while two other teams played, Chloe shook uncontrollably with laughter at the good-natured banter between the competitors.

“Penalty! Excessive giggling!” shouted adaptive physical education teacher and goalball referee Mike Pecorella with a big smile on his face.

“We obviously had a lot of fun,” said 17-year-old Lina, from Chelmsford. “I think it’s empowering. Kids who are blind in public schools don’t get to play sports. I think we have this mindset that we can’t do them. It was nice to participate and be part of a team.”

## Slight modifications make sports accessible

All the sports the teens enjoyed had some kind of [adaptation](#) to make them accessible and safe for people with limited or no vision.

For the 50- and 100-meter dashes, some teens held on to a waist-high wire that stretched the length of the track, while other sprinters were able to see special high-contrast markings on the track. For longer races, teens were tethered to sighted guides and ran in tandem with them.

For the long jump, competitors first paced off the distance between the starting line and the jump-off point, and then counted their steps as they ran and leaped into the sand. Adaptive physical education teacher Matt LaCortiglia also clapped at the end of the runway as an audible reminder to jump.

The young athletes were honored when they won a competition, and also for enthusiastic participation.

Staffers circulated a “fun stick,” a highly tactile, decorated tube about a yard long. Competitors earned the right to carry it whenever they demonstrated good sportsmanship, made a particularly good effort, or simply showed they were having fun.

“The stick was a motivator for the kids,” O’Connell said. “Once the campers heard the cheering and their name, their faces lit up.”

Staffers also introduced teens to the [United States Association of Blind Athletes \(USABA\)](#), which offers sports opportunities to thousands of children with visual impairments. The USABA helps dispel the myth that people who are blind can’t play sports by inviting kids to participate in everything from local grassroots USABA programs to elite Paralympic competitions.

O’Connell said she hopes the teens—most of whom attend public schools in Massachusetts and Connecticut—will be inspired to continue to play sports after they leave Camp Abilities.

“So many kids with visual impairments can easily be involved in sports,” she said. “We’re giving them the tools so that these kids can be athletic on their own.”

Lina is one of the teens who got that message. She’s been accepted to Simmons College for the upcoming fall semester and said she hopes to start a goalball club at college.

“I think sighted kids would find it fun too,” she said.

Camp Abilities was founded by Lauren Lieberman, Ph.D., in 1996 at SUNY Brockport, New York. Her goal: to empower children and teens with visual and hearing impairments to be physically active and improve their health and well-being. Since then, Camp Abilities has spread to more than 17 states and

internationally to countries like Portugal and Costa Rica. [The Camp Abilities at Perkins](#), which was sponsored by [Perkins' Outreach Services](#), was the first in the Boston area.

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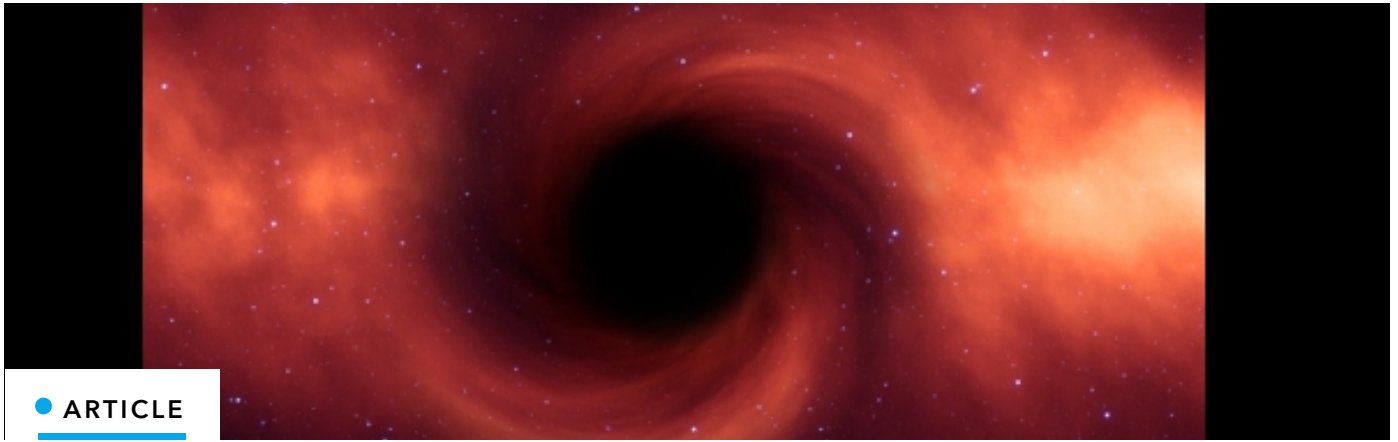
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