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Rockville High School's Unified Sports Team wins Michaels' Jewelers Cup and National Banner

VERNON, Connecticut -- Rockville High School's Unified Sports program has been making winners and a difference for more than a decade and was recently honored by the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference as one of the best programs in Connecticut.

The team received the Michaels Jewelers' Unified Sports Cup Award, which recognizes the team and its athletes for what they achieve both on and off the court. Rockville High's program also won a National Unified Champion School banner from Special Olympics.



Rockville High School Unified Sports athletes and mentors pose with the Michaels' Jewelers Cup and the National Unified Champion School banner.

Unified Sports is a movement in Special Olympics to bring students with disabilities together with their peers who do not have disabilities. About 95 percent of Connecticut's high schools participate in the program.

The Vernon Public Schools, in partnership with family and community, is committed to provide a quality education, with high expectations, in a safe environment where all students become independent learners and productive contributors to society.

Unified Sports athletes at Rockville High compete in soccer, basketball, bowling and tennis. But athletics is only part of what happens. The athletes and their student mentors and coaches also host an annual Snowflake Dance for area Unified Sports programs and sponsor an annual bowling tournament. They also join together for fundraising efforts, a family pasta dinner, trips to professional sporting events and programs with students in Rockville High's Agricultural Science & Technology Program.

"This is an opportunity for the students with disabilities to participate and to be part of the school's athletic program," said Joe Prignano, the team's coach and a transition coordinator in Rockville High School's special education program. "When they compete they are incredibly competitive, but it is also nurturing. The sportsmanship and comradery is unbelievable when you go to these events."



Rockville High School Unified Sports athletes Emily Aiudi, Peter Kratzke, Brianna Jimenez and Alexis Lebel pose with the Michaels' Cup.

The Michaels' Cup will reside at Rockville High for the year. The banner is Rockville High's to keep.

"The Michaels' Cup is like an Olympic gold medal," Vernon Superintendent of Schools Dr. Joseph Macary said. "And winning the Michaels' Cup is wonderful recognition of a program that illustrates our school system's commitment to a culture of inclusion and equal opportunity. Unified Sports is good for the athletes and it's good for our schools and community."

Vernon Mayor Dan Champagne said the Unified Sports team's achievement is something he hopes makes all Vernon residents proud. "On behalf of myself and the town council, congratulations to the athletes, coaches, mentors and everyone else who supports Unified Sports and played a role in this amazing accomplishment."

"The Michaels' Cup is a big deal for Rockville High School and we are so honored to have earned it," added Rockville High School Principal Jason Magao. "Our athletes, mentors and coaches make us proud."

The mentors are students who do not have disabilities who volunteer to help their fellow students enjoy sports and the other programs the team offers.

"Our mentors, they're so good-natured," Prignano said. "They blend very well with our athletes."

Ashley McCauley, a Rockville High senior and team mentor, said she got involved in Unified Sports as a freshman. "It looked like fun and a good way to include students with disabilities in the larger school community," she said. "I love it."

Peter Kratzke and Tyler Lapointe are in their third year as athletes on Rockville High's Unified Sports team. Both said they love sports, competing and being on the team.

"We like to warm up and get ready for our games," Lapointe said.

"I like the sports and it motivates me to get healthier," Kratzke said.

The coronavirus pandemic has limited what the team has been able to do, but the team hasn't given up, McCauley said. "We can't do basketball or soccer, but we're trying bocce."

The relationships mentors and athletes build carry over into other school activities, which is important, said Megan McAuliffe, another mentor. "The relationships we build continue outside of Unified," she said. "We gain a lot of friends."

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