

A chance to shine

Wheelchair athletes look to school district for financial boost

By Jon Gillooly

Marietta Daily Journal Staff Writer

MARIETTA — The Cobb Cougars, an indoor soccer and basketball team, is like any children's sports team.

Its members practice every week at Campbell Middle School to hone their skills, and they compete to win — they've come out on top in every game of the season.

But they don't use their feet to get them from goal to goal — they use their wheels.

All eight members of the team are in wheelchairs because of various muscle disorders, from muscular dystrophy to spinal muscular atrophy. The team's members range from elementary school to high school students.

Thus far, the seven-year-old Cougars have operated without the financial support of the Cobb County School District, requiring parents to spring for registration costs, bus trips for away games, and jerseys, said one of the team's volunteer coaches, Nikki Wilson of Austell.

The American Association of Adapted Sports, the national group that organizes the teams, has let them slide on much of the costs, but the Cougars are in danger of folding if they don't get financial backing,



Simonica West, 18, of Marietta prepares to shoot the ball during a game of soccer Saturday.

Ms. Wilson said.

She said that all too often, children with disabilities fall through the cracks of society.

"A lot of people are not empathetic with these kids' needs," she said.

"There is just a stigma associated with having a disability in our society.

"They're there to compete. They

want to win the games. It also improves their social skills and gives them an opportunity to fit in and feel normal. This is their only opportunity to compete in competitive sports."

Michele Davis's 13-year-old son, Chad Crews, who attends Cooper Middle School, has been with the soccer team since 1998.

Chad was born with arthrogryposis, a condition that limits the range of the body's joints. While doctors remain uncertain as to the cause, some think it's due to a lack of amniotic fluid in the womb, limiting the movement of the baby, she said.

When Chad was born, his feet were so clubbed that his big toe nearly touched his heel and his knee was locked in such a way that his leg stuck straight out. Chad has had a number of surgeries since then, but he is confined to a wheelchair, she said.

"I can't see him ever walking, but as a mom, you always hope," said Ms. Davis, who lives in Powder Springs.

Being a part of the Cougars is huge part of their lives, she said.

"It's such a pleasure to sit down with mothers and discuss what they have gone through. It makes you feel like you're not alone," Ms. Davis said.

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The team also has given Chad a good dose of confidence and a chance to shine, she said.

"It gives him the opportunity to know what it feels like to be a star. Chad always wanted trophies, and until he was 6, he didn't have one. He has nothing wrong with his mind; he's a straight-A student. He just needs to play a sport just like everybody. He's all boy."

Ms. Davis said she is deeply disappointed that the school district doesn't support them and hopes it will change its mind.

And according to district spokesman Jay Dillon, that just may happen.

"The superintendent was impressed with this program and the presentation of it (they met with him at open office hours the day before the board meeting)," Dillon said. "Right now, there is no budget to help fund the program. Gen. Redden has asked staff to look into whether other school systems in Georgia are funding it, and, if so, how they are doing it. I believe he would like to help them out if he can find the means in the budget to do it."

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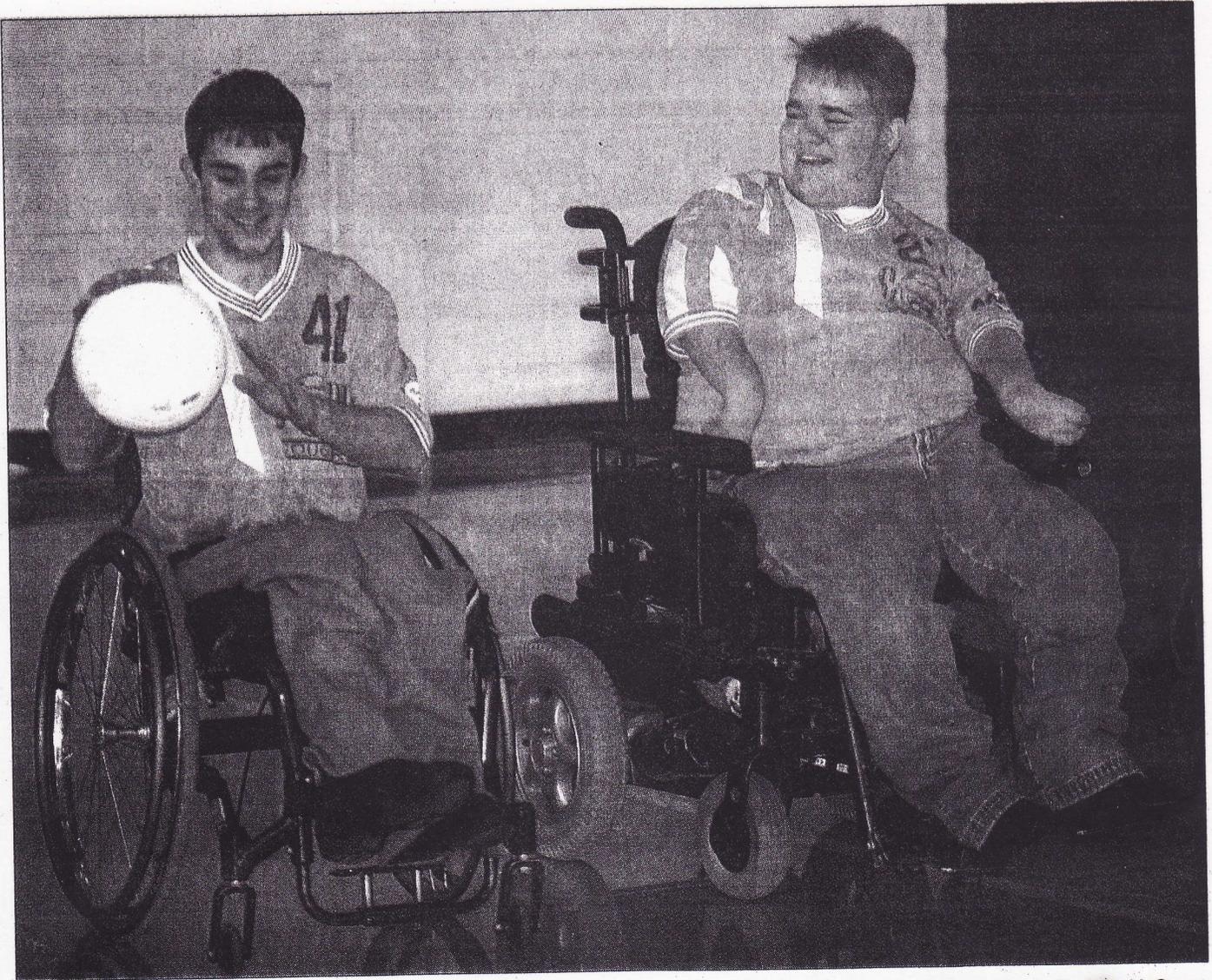
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"It gives him the opportunity to know what it feels like to be a star."

— Michele Davis, whose 13-year-old son, Chad Crews, is part of a soccer team composed of students in wheelchairs



Staff photos by Todd R. McQueen

Spencer Bolivar, 17, left, is guarded by 13-year-old Chad Crews during a Cobb Cougars' game of soccer Saturday at Campbell Middle School. The indoor soccer and basketball team comprises students who are in wheelchairs because of various muscle disorders. The Cougars hope the Cobb County School District will help support the team, which requires parents to pay for registration fees, jerseys and other costs.