

WINNING BIG

VIP sports programs are a victory for players with special needs and volunteer buddies

by **CYNDI BEMEL**

It's a whirlwind of smiles, excitement and organized chaos when members of the VIP (Very Important Player) Basketball program take the court at the Balboa Sports Center in Encino.

There are no whistles blown for double dribbling, no consequences for running out of bounds, no fouls are called, everyone plays, and the game always ends in a tie.

Most of the players don't even know what team they are on, but it doesn't matter. They are all winners.

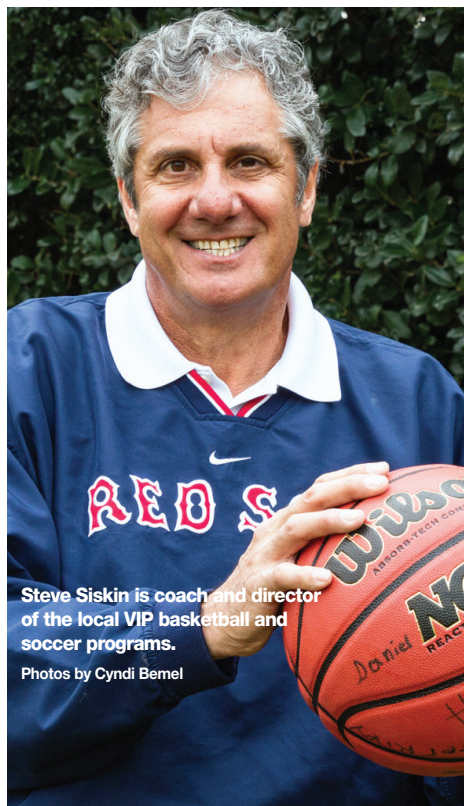
"The biggest thing is to make sure that the kids are having fun, every kid scores a basket, make sure no one gets hurt and that parents can relax with a feeling of normalcy that their kids are out playing a sport," said Steven Siskin, the program's coach and director — and the first to raise his hands in celebration when a player makes a basket.

Siskin, 58 and a principle at Raymond James Financial Services, started VIP Basketball 13 years ago. That's when Siskin saw Jasmine Banayan, then a 13-year-old with Down syndrome and a sister of his son's friend, watching her older brother Josh play basketball from the end of the bench. It was obvious that she'd rather be playing but didn't have the skill set to be part of a mainstream team.

A passionate supporter of the health benefits that all kids receive from being active, Siskin invited Jasmine and eight of her friends with special needs, many from Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, to play a friendly game with his son's team. It was a success, and everyone wanted to continue on a regular basis.

Now, Siskin's VIP Basketball and VIP Soccer programs (his soccer team is part of a larger VIP program run by the American Youth Soccer Organization, or AYSO) are attracting scores of 11- to 27-year-olds with a diverse range of special needs from Thousand Oaks, West Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley. (There are other similar, unrelated VIP programs throughout Southern California, including VIP Baseball.)

Siskin's participants meet twice a week, to practice and to play a Saturday game, during each three-month season. (Basketball wraps up this month; soccer begins in September.) He has approximately 40 basketball players in the program — and up to 60 for soccer — with new players constantly joining as the word spreads.



Steve Siskin is coach and director of the local VIP basketball and soccer programs.

Photos by Cyndi Bemel

"It's a safe haven, a place to go and feel like you are part of something. These are young citizens, and just because they have special needs, that doesn't define them," said Priscilla Picard, board member of the Los Angeles chapter of Autism Speaks, whose son, Zach (aka "Big Z"), has been part of both teams for more than 10 years.

The other integral part of the leagues' success has to do with the student volunteers, "buddies" from local schools, who shadow the athletes. While Siskin and his volunteers are loosely teaching the fundamentals of passing, dribbling and trying to instill the qualities of good sportsmanship and being part of a team, the buddies are receiving just as much — if not more — in return.

"Every kid has taught me a different lesson — some about commitment, some about loving other people, understanding and patience," said Matt Steinman, 17, head buddy, assistant coach and a senior at Calabasas High School. "My commitment to these kids and anyone that has a disability like this will continue throughout my life. I will always carve out some time to give back to the community."

Buddies come from the numerous schools in the area, including New Community Jewish High School in West Hills, Milken Community Schools in Bel Air, Chaminade High School in West Hills and Notre Dame High School in Sherman Oaks. There are volunteers working on b'nai mitzvah and *tikkun olam* projects, too.

In the end, though, the VIP program exists for a pretty simple reason.

"I like to play basketball," explained Raffi Moshe, 27, born with hydrocephalus, a build-up of too much fluid in the brain; he has been playing VIP basketball for three seasons.

His mother, Bathsheva Moshe of Granada Hills, said there's a social benefit as well: "It's very hard for these people to socialize, and this way they get together and experience some friendship."

There is a sense of inclusion and camaraderie among the players that has grown off the court. Many are involved in other programs focused on young people with special needs, including Kolot Tikvah (Voices of Hope) choir at Temple Aliyah in Woodland Hills



Above: A VIP basketball team photo. The program started 13 years ago and includes volunteers who shadow athletes with special needs. Below: VIP basketball participant Zach Cohen takes a shot during a recent game.

and Shaare Tikva (Gates of Hope) at Valley Beth Shalom, which offers Jewish learning and social experiences. They have volunteered as a group for Operation Gratitude as well, putting together care packages of toiletries for military troops.

Siskin attributes much of the success of both the VIP basketball and AYSO VIP soccer programs to his committed team mom, Karen Henderson, AYSO Region 33 VIP director (ayso33.org). Along with her son Kyle, 22, who has cerebral palsy and brain damage, they have been with Siskin since the very beginning of both programs.

"We want our kids to have everything that a normal child has," she said after a recent basketball game. "Did you see any kids out there saying, 'Oh, I'm special needs. I'm a pity party.'? No, the kids are out there having a blast."

"There is no guidebook for having special-needs kids," she continued. "This is our life. We don't sit back and wait for someone to bring it to us. We go after it."

Sharing a similar commitment was the late Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who founded the Special Olympics in 1962. Growing up with her sister Rosemary, who had intellectual disabilities, Shriver spent her life pioneering for rights and equality in education, employment and, especially, through sport for these special citizens.

Continuing Shriver's legacy, the Special Olympics World Games are coming to Los Angeles this summer, July 25-Aug.



2. It's anticipated to be the largest event hosted by L.A. since the 1984 Olympic Games, with more than 7,000 athletes from 170 countries sporting 25 events, at 27 venues.

"There are millions of athletes out there, and if somebody sees them this summer on ESPN, they could say my kid looks just like them, with Down syndrome or autism. Maybe I can get them into a Special Olympics program just like this," said Eloise Crawford, regional director for the Special Olympics Southern California. "Our athletes are exceptional people. They want us to come and see them do these exceptional things. Sport is just a conduit for some of the things that they are doing every day."

One of the major goals of the Special Olympics World Games committee is to have the stands filled with fans cheering on these special athletes. The events are free to attend, and there are numerous ways to get involved as a volunteer. Siskin is planning on volunteering and is encouraging his athletes and families to get involved too.

All Siskin wants his VIP players to do is come out of their shells — and have a lot of fun in the process — by providing them a chance to play a sport, just like their brothers and sisters.

"When a kid throws 10 balls up but finally one goes in, oh, man, everyone puts their hands up and the place goes crazy," he said. "They get the feeling that they are just regular kids, and that's all they want." ■