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CRUISE CONTROL

Club Membership has its Rewards



Grace and Carter Plumb love coming to Cruisers Multi-sport program and their mother Keri loves bringing them! She says it is great to see the smiles on their faces all night long. Plumb smiles when she shares the sentiments of her able-bodied daughter Grace. "Those kids are so lucky," Grace remarked. "They get to take their wheelchairs home with them."

Cruisers Sports for the Physically Disabled is a Mississauga-based club with a mission to enhance the quality of life for individuals with physical disabilities through sport and recreational activity. Offering sledge hockey, wheelchair basketball, track and field, and a boccia program, the Cruisers also run a unique Multi-sports program for young children with physical disabilities. Grace and Carter are two of twenty children who attend. A play-based program, it is unique in that it welcomes able-bodied siblings to join in the games in a wheelchair, alongside their brother or sister with a disability.

Program coach Kathy Ludwig started this little group almost twenty years ago to give her son Karl a place to play with his sister and friends. Karl was born with spina bifida. "The Multi-sport group was a place where he wouldn't feel different, but just part of a group," she explains. Karl, now twenty-three, has tried almost all of the sports that Cruisers have to offer but found his favourite on the ice and has climbed the ranks to earn himself a spot on the National Developmental Sledge Hockey Team. Karl isn't alone in such achievements. Many of the Cruisers athletes who now compete at higher levels in sports began their athletic career in this play-based group.

Although we are aware of the benefits of physical activity, it is sometimes difficult to find a place for youngsters with physical disabilities to receive adequate exercise. The Cruisers' weekly Multi-sport program is that place, serving up an opportunity for kids to wheel about in a fun, safe environment.

From schoolyard games such as tag and Red Rover to beginner basketball drills, Ludwig's brainchild steadily gives youngsters with physical disabilities the chance to work their muscles and endurance while practicing and pushing their wheelchair skills. What's more, while the kids play, their parents

take the opportunity to socialize, sharing experiences, mentoring and making new family friendships. As the children grow and learn, they, as well as their parents, become aware not only of the benefits of physical fitness, but also of the different opportunities available to them.

Sakina Rehmanji's two sons are both members of the Cruisers Multi-sport group. Yasin has Freidreichs Ataxia and uses a wheelchair, and his brother Alisanger also joins in, playing games in a borrowed wheelchair. "Since joining Cruisers a 'light bulb' has gone off for Yasin," says Rehmanji. "Only now does he understand that there are many people with varying disabilities and these disabilities do not make us abnormal, but rather, special and unique. Cruisers provides a weekly play activity that both of my children can participate in together. When everyone is playing in a wheelchair the playing field is leveled and everyone can join in."

Carter Plumb is currently the youngest Multi-sports player and his mom credits the volunteers for much of her son's enthusiasm for the program. "They give their time to create a welcoming, fun atmosphere," commends Plumb. "The teenage volunteers come from the other sports that Cruisers offers – wheelchair basketball, sledge hockey and track – and they are exceptional role models for our future athletes. They encourage, help, and share their experiences from competitive tournaments and events."

Cruisers kids are just like other kids... they love having fun. Antonia Spiteri's son Sam has cerebral palsy and participates with his brother Josh. "Both boys love playing all the games," says Spiteri. "Cruisers Multi-sports group obviously has all of the traditional benefits of a sports group – the social interaction, self esteem, and the health benefits of exercise. But Cruisers has also given my child a life outside of hospital visits, case conferences, doctor's appointments, physical therapy, occupational therapists and dealing with medical jargon... a place where once a week he can just be a kid."

"Having a disability may be part of these youngsters' lives, but it does not have to define who they are!" emphasizes Coach Ludwig.

Visit www.cruisers-sports.com for more information on this program and others the club offers.