

Our Town

Brockport athletes help with Unified basketball



West Extra
Caurie Putnam
Guest columnist

Between them, Brockport High School seniors Peyton Young and Samantha "Sami" Rogers have three sectional titles — hockey and soccer for Peyton and indoor track for Sami.

But, those aren't the pinnacle of their outstanding high school sports careers.

"Unified basketball is," Peyton says, with Sami nodding in agreement. "It's the best thing I've done in high school sports."

Peyton and Sami, who are longtime friends, will start their second season on Brockport's Unified basketball team this spring. Unified basketball is a Section V sanctioned sport that debuted here in 2015 and is run in partnership with Special Olympics New York.

Rosters are a mix of students with cognitive and other disabilities (referred to as partner players) and those without. Teams play other Section V teams and all players must commit strictly to unified (they cannot play another varsity spring sport).

"I love the inclusiveness of it," said Peyton, who gave up playing varsity baseball for unified basketball. "It's just really fun and it's great to see how all the kids really put their hearts into it."

Peyton, 18, and Sami, 17, didn't know any of the partner players when they

signed up, but both quickly bonded with Jordan Whitehair, 16.

"The first practice he was sitting on the sidelines all alone and I just went over and talked to him and before I knew it I had a new best friend," Sami said.

Jordan, whose father Doug Whitehair describes as "grumpy and not easily motivated," fell in love with Unified basketball thanks to Sami and Peyton's friendship.

"It's been amazing and very special to see the friendship develop," Doug said. "They've brought him in and accepted them. He loves them both deeply and has a lot of fun with them."

When Jordan made his first basket last season Sami broke down in tears on the court. And, when she played in her final varsity soccer game in the fall, she chose Jordan as the person she admired most. Peyton escorted Jordan onto the soccer field during the senior night celebration to stand with Sami.

Their Unified basketball experience has been so positive it influenced Sami and Peyton's senior project choices (at Brockport, seniors are required to complete a senior project that explores an interest of theirs).

Peyton is raising money via GoFundMe to purchase playground toys and equipment to make recess more inclusive for all students. Sami is organizing a dance for students with special needs on the west side to be held on April 27 at the A.D. Oliver Middle School in Brockport.

"I just want to give back to all the kids that have done so much for me," Sami said. "They are all so smart, so happy and so capable in their own ways."

Also in part because of their Unified experience, both Sami and Peyton want to pursue careers assisting kids with special needs. Peyton, who will attend the College at Brockport, wants to be an adaptive physical education teacher and Sami, who will attend Nazareth College,



Brockport High School seniors Peyton Young, left, and Samantha "Sami" Rogers, right, are focusing their senior projects on recreation for kids with special needs. Both are members of Brockport's Unified basketball team. CAURIE PUTNAM

wants to be a speech pathologist.

"In Unified, for all the kids involved, there's so much personal growth you don't get in a classroom," said Mike Zale, a Brockport teacher who coached Unified basketball last year. "Jordan is a student who has a hard time sometimes coming out of his shell, but Peyton and

Sami earned his trust. That type of trust is not easy to earn ... they're all extraordinary kids."

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