

# TEAM SHARON

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PHOTO BY SEAN BROWN

Volunteer Mary Kusher, right, assists Stars soccer player Anna Sweet during a drill at the Horizon for Youth field in Sharon.

# Stars shining bright

## Special needs soccer program is a success

By **Kate Sullivan Foley**  
SPORTS CORRESPONDENT

Sharon Stars — a sports program for children with special needs — is touching lives, enabling successes and creating happiness.

A couple years ago, Sharon resident Katie Currul-Dykeman and her husband Scott Dykeman took their son to Norwood in order for him to participate in a sports program. Unfortunately the design of the special needs program was not ideal for young Colin, now 7, who is autistic. But, the overall concept struck a chord with the parents, who created Sharon Stars sports league in the fall of 2009.

This past October, Currul-Dykeman's son and more than a dozen other children completed the second season of Stars Soccer. The program also boasts baseball in the summer and basketball in the winter. The goal of the program is to provide children with special needs the opportunity to learn about and play sports in a relaxed, fun environment with the aid of caring coaches and teenage role models.

"It's about finding a way for all of the kids to be successful," Currul-Dykeman said.

The concept for the program took root at a Sharon Special Education Parents Advisory committee meeting when Currul-Dykeman heard other parents wishing there were more recreational opportunities available for their children.

"You feel sad that your child can't participate and have the same experiences that all his cousins and other friends' kids are having," Currul-Dykeman said.

The college professor and mom also to son Patrick, 4, felt that a sports league held in the same place at the same time with the same basic routine would work well for her son and others with special needs. When she shared her ideas and other parents expressed interest, Currul-Dykeman decided to spearhead the effort to create the league.

She contacted the recreation department, who agreed to handle the league's registration. Then, she coordinated schedules and recruited coaches and teenage volunteers for the different age groups — one league for younger children ages 6-12 and one for teenagers and young adults ages 13-22.

Currul-Dykeman had some ideas on how to run the league, but welcomed input from two behaviorists from New England Center for Children, a school for autistic children.

"They watched everything and gave a bunch of great tips," she said.

A vital aspect of the program, Currul-Dykeman said, is the active involvement of the 17 teenage volunteers.

"They come and they form relationships with the kids and they act like mini-coaches," she said.

Additionally, the concept helps to build a better, more understanding community, especially at the high school level.

"It really has an anti-bullying piece to it," Currul-

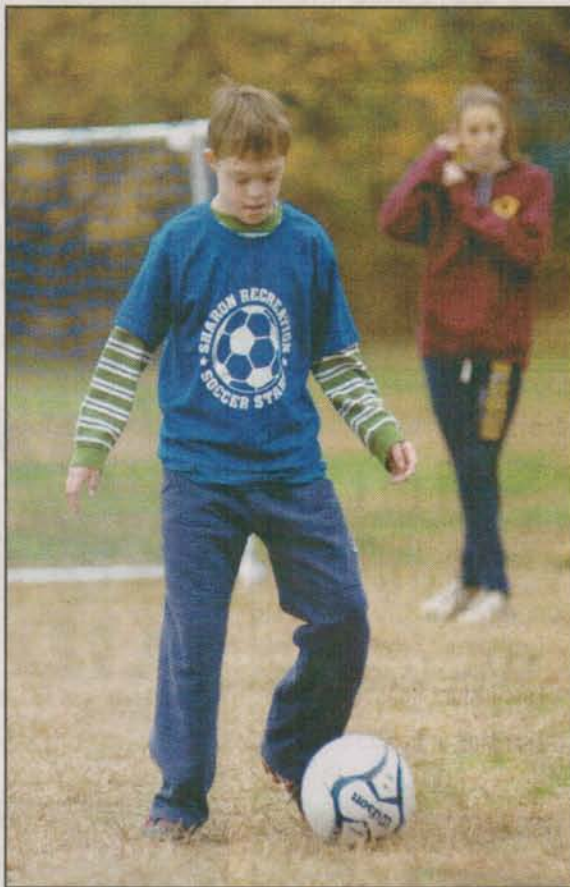


PHOTO BY SEAN BROWNE

**Aidan Murphy dribbles the ball for the Sharon Stars.**

Dykeman said.

The peer coaches recognize the special needs players at school and sometimes have lunch with them, she added.

One of those teenagers, Sharon High School senior Michael Silverstein, has been volunteering since the program started. A volunteer also with The Friendship Circle — a one-on-one peer model program for children with special needs, Silverstein, 17, enjoys helping the children by introducing them to new activities and expanding their perception of life, he said.

Through the Stars Program, the kids get to learn a skill, make mistakes, move on from the mistakes and be successful, he said.

Silverstein, 17, works mostly with the older group of players. He is impressed with the progress they have made.

"When they score a goal, their whole face lights up," Silverstein said.

Bridgit Wald, 16, works with the younger players. She said many of the kids were nervous at first, but they stuck with it and have shown interest and improvement. The way the program is set up to offer one-on-one attention is very beneficial, she said.

"The kids are the center of attention for that hour — they get a lot of support," Wald said.

Another benefit of the program is the repetition of it. Each soccer practice starts with stretching and running and is followed by lessons on kicking and passing, she

## SHARON SPORTS



PHOTO BY SEAN BROWNE

Patrick Linehan, right, gets a hand from his therapist Andrew Charles while participating in the Sharon Stars soccer program.

# Stars are out on the pitch

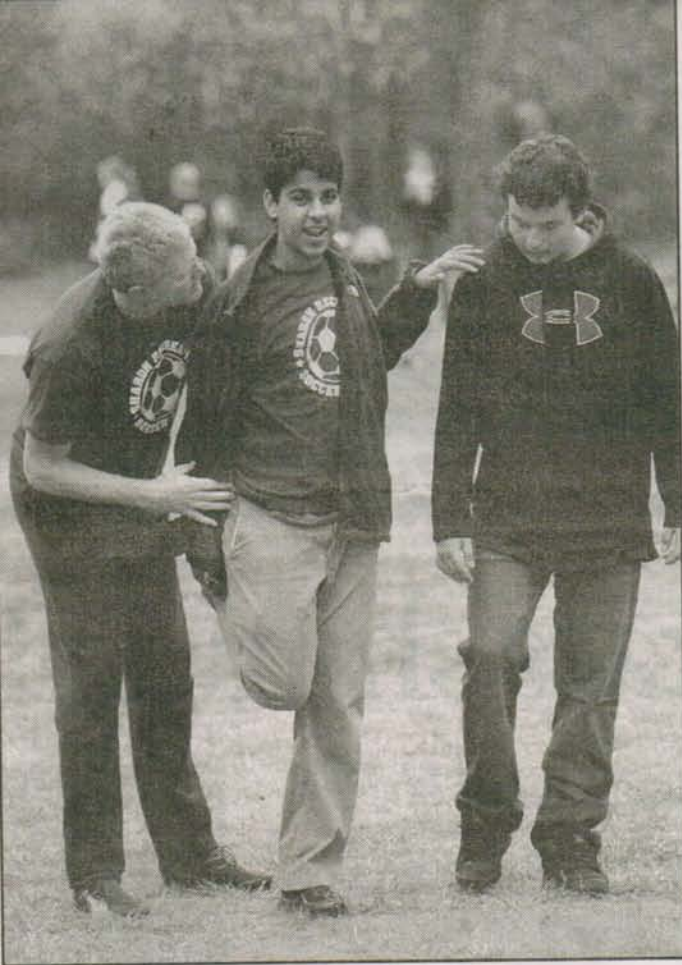


PHOTO BY SEAN BROWNE

Coach Brendan Murphy, left, and volunteer Ryan Elantri, right, help Naga Reddivari stretch during a recent session of Sharon Stars soccer program.

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said. Throughout the hour, the players are given a lot of positive reinforcement, she said.

"It really boosts their confidence," Wald said.

Yoni Monat, a sophomore at Sharon High School, has also been volunteering since the Stars program started. Like Wald, he works one-on-one with the younger kids.

He said the overall sports environment helps foster the younger children's desire to play.

"Seeing the other kids playing inspires them to want to do it too," Monat said.

He said the kids all seem to have fun and their parents look like they really enjoy watching.

In fact, Currul-Dykeman said, the league offers a bit of respite for some parents.

"They get 45 minutes off where they can talk to other par-

ents," she said.

Having just completed the soccer season, Currul-Dykeman said, she is amazed at how far so many of the players, including her son, have come. The first season, her son had a tough time just staying on the field and not venturing into the woods, she said.

Now, he is excited about playing soccer and talks a lot about his soccer friends. He also stayed on the field and participated in the sport the whole season, she said.

"I am thrilled with what he has accomplished," Currul-Dykeman said.

*Sharon's Basketball Stars Program begins Sunday, December 1st. Players can register online at [www.sharonrec.com](http://www.sharonrec.com). For more information, email [csd41003@comcast.net](mailto:csd41003@comcast.net).*