
Posted on Wed, Nov. 03, 2004

League gives these players a place they can call home

By Jeff Wilson
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Ten teen-age boys were packed inside a YMCA gym way too small and out of date for high school and middle school teams.

This group didn't seem to care about the tile flooring, the rounded backboards and the court too narrow for a 3-point line. They raced through dribbling drills, layup lines and took jump shots as if they were playing at Thomas Coliseum.

But most of these kids will never experience the thrill that accompanies playing in a raucous gymnasium. They are all home-schooled students, a fraction of the estimated 90,000 in North Texas who have seen their sports opportunities run dry as the overwhelming majority of their peers join school teams.

However, an outlet has emerged in Tarrant County, giving boys and girls a chance to extend their athletic careers without compromising their very private educational scope.

The Texas Home Educators Sports Association has given new hope to many teens who had given up on sports. THESA has grown in size and credibility since its debut season in 2002, and its teams, which compete in four sports, are overcoming misconceptions about home-schooled athletes.

The group has about 90 athletes competing in four sports -- baseball, volleyball, boys basketball and golf. The teams, all nicknamed the Riders, mostly play TAPPS schools and other home-school groups. THESA teams have players who live as far as Mansfield to the south and Argyle to the north.

"There's a big need for home-school sports in the area," said Colleyville home-school parent Jon Dickens, who helped create the association in August 2002. "People typically deviate from their vision of a goal for home-schooling if their kids are athletic and want to move to the next level."

Jon and his wife Mary faced that dilemma with the oldest of their six children, Luke. A baseball player, Luke tried public school as a freshman at Colleyville Heritage, then returned to home-schooling and played at Grapevine Faith, a TAPPS umbrella school, as a sophomore.

But that avenue started to close as Faith's enrollment grew. And son Joshua was also about to enter his high school years.

"That led us into, 'Well, let's see if there might be another opportunity,' " Jon said.

The Dickens learned of the Home School Athletic Association, which fields teams in the Dallas area under the guidance of John Hendricks. Dickens said Hendricks gave him and other home-school parents, including former Rangers batting-practice pitcher Ronnie Liggett, a model to form their own association.

The biggest challenge was getting the word out. The home-school community is a tight one, Dickens said, so he used the Internet and e-mail to inform parents that he and Liggett were forming a baseball team.

"We came to the first tryout, and we didn't have any idea of what we would have, even if we'd have enough for a team," Dickens said. "We ended up getting enough kids to have a baseball team, and really got off to a great start."

The balls started rolling in other sports, too. News of a baseball team inspired volleyball and golf teams. Boys middle school and junior-varsity basketball started last year.

Michael Kossuth, a 15-year-old from Euless, said he learned about the basketball team this year.

"I was excited. I just want to go out and play," said Kossuth, whose other options were "either to go to a public school and see if I could play there, or just keep playing [recreation leagues]."

Said Liggett, who played college baseball at Lamar and is a former UT-Arlington assistant coach: "The key thing is finding someone, as Jon always says, to champion a sport. There's just a lot of work to get it going and get it organized."

The association needs locations for practices and games. The Bedford Boys Ranch is the basketball and volleyball teams' gym of preference.

And, of course, they need teams to play. Dickens said the Dallas-area group helped ease scheduling because it has a reputation of fielding competitive teams.

THESA's eight-member varsity volleyball team has played against TAPPS teams Colleyville Covenant, Watauga Harvest and Fort Worth Christian, among others. The Riders are 18-7 this season and finished third in the Cedar Hill Trinity tournament under coach Kelley McPeek, a home-school parent of six.

The team is headed to Nebraska this week for the National Homeschool Volleyball Tournament in Omaha. The baseball team has played in the National Homeschool World Series near Pensacola, Fla., the past two seasons.

Players said many of the opponents don't respect them and are shocked after losing to a home-school team.

"They get very upset," said volleyball player Amanda Hunt, 17, of Keller. "When we beat them, they're like, '*We got beat by a home-school team?*' I guess they feel like we're bad, and we're home-schooled, and we get to practice every day. We don't. We practice one, maybe two times a week during the season, if that."

Dickens said his group tries to play by the same rules as its opponents to help dispel the misconceptions home-schooled players frequently face.

"A lot of the teams get accused of practicing all day long because they're home-schoolers," Dickens said. "We do the same things as other schools -- practice a couple hours a day, have an age limit so we don't have guys with full beards out there."

That practice myth is one reason why TAPPS will suspend its umbrella program in 2006. President Edd Burleson said private school teams have complained for years that umbrella schools, such as Grapevine Faith, have an unfair advantage by fielding teams with home-schoolers. As a concession, Burleson said, TAPPS will create a home-school division in 2006.

"So like students will be competing against like students," Burleson said. "They would have a structured place. We'd take care of their playoffs. We'll treat them just like a separate division."

For now, THESA is content as an independent. Dickens said TAPPS would offer a chance to play for district and state titles, but also limit the number of games the Riders can play.

He also said group enrollments could tilt the playing field. Liggett, the basketball coach who home-schools his four children with wife Debbie, said THESA is the equivalent of a TAPPS Division IV team, the same level as Colleyville Covenant and Watauga Harvest.

In the meantime, THESA will continue is stated goal of providing sports and developing character.

"I actually learn more life teachings," said Hunt, who played in the Midlothian school district through her freshman year. "Our coach [McPeek] teaches us more than volleyball. She teaches us that volleyball's not everything. I like it better than a public-school team."

IN THE KNOW

A PLACE TO PLAY

The Texas Home Educators Sports Association started play in August 2002 as a sports outlet for Tarrant County home-school students. It has grown to include about 90 players in four sports -- baseball, boys basketball, golf and volleyball.

For information, visit the association's home page at www.thesa.org.

Other groups in Fort Worth-Dallas: King's Warriors, Weatherford Express, Dallas Thunder, Parker/Tarrant Home Schoolers, Arlington Association of Home Educators and Home School Athletic Association.

Jeff Wilson, (817) 685-3873 jwilson@star-telegram.com

© 2004 Star-Telegram and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.dfw.com>