



NEW JERSEY



News Release

DISABLED ATHLETES TO EMBARK ON INCREDIBLE JOURNEY TO 54 NEW JERSEY RINKS IN 54 HOURS

Band of Disabled Hockey Players to Visit Every NJ Rink during Hockey Weekend Across America on a Mission to Make Their Sport Available to “EveryBODY”

PARK RIDGE, NJ; NEW YORK, NY; COLORADO SPRINGS, CO (January 4, 2009) – A group of disabled athletes will make history, Jan. 29-31, by visiting all 54 rinks in the State of New Jersey in just 54 hours to raise awareness for Disabled Hockey. This incredible, record-setting journey is entitled [EveryBODY Skates New Jersey](http://www.everybodyskates.com/) (ESNJ), and will take place during Hockey Weekend Across America.

The mission of ESNJ is to convince New Jersey ice rinks to allocate just one hour of ice time per week, in season, to Disabled Hockey. Anyone believing that New Jersey rinks should make hockey more accessible to persons with disabilities can learn more and sign an on-line petition pledging their support at <http://www.everybodyskates.com/>. Supporters can also follow ESNJ on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) (@54in54).

Special vehicles will transport the athletes from rink to rink during the 54-hour odyssey, which will commence with an event at the *NHL Powered by Reebok Store* in New York City on Jan. 29 and conclude at the Prudential Center (a.k.a. “The Rock”) during the New Jersey Devils home game on Jan. 31 at 5pm. Along the way, disabled athletes from four disciplines – sled, standing amputee, deaf/hard of hearing and special hockey – will meet local youth, college and adult hockey players, rink management and community leaders. In addition to being honored by the Devils, the ESNJ athletes will attend and be recognized at the Philadelphia Flyers home game on Jan. 30 at 1pm.

This initiative is being led by a pair of brothers, Jon and Andrew Schwartz, who each coach a Disabled Hockey team in the area. Jon coaches the West Orange-based NJ Dare Devils Special Hockey Team, which is comprised of more than 50 players with developmental disabilities, aged 5-adult. Andrew coaches the Westchester, NY-based United Spinal Rangers Sled Hockey Team, which is a collection of players with physical disabilities who compete all over the East Coast.

Autism, Obesity, Depression & the Disabled: NJ’s Staggering Numbers

Nearly 1.4 million disabled people – 16% of the state population – call New Jersey home. That is double the state poverty rate. It’s also the same number of students enrolled in the state’s 2,500 high schools. New Jersey also leads the nation with a staggering 1 in 94 children diagnosed with Autism. Additionally, there is a higher incidence of obesity and depression among disabled New Jerseyans, leading to other health issues. Hockey is great occupational therapy for the physically and developmentally disabled.

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“Habitual physical activity and team sports are missing components in the lives of many disabled persons,” said J.J. O’Connor, Chair of USA Hockey’s Disabled Section and General Manager of the 2010 Paralympics Sled Hockey Team. “Participating in hockey can not only have a positive impact on physical fitness, socialization and self confidence, but can also positively affect an employer’s willingness to hire disabled persons who possess the qualities that team sports promote.”

A record-high 3,000 citizen soldiers from New Jersey are currently involved in combat missions. A large percentage of soldiers returning to the state from Iraq and Afghanistan have psychological and physical disabilities. Many suffer from hearing loss, paralysis and often times, amputation. Disabled Hockey offers sanctuary to all of our injured veterans.

Ice Shortage; Dispelling Myths Present Main Challenges

From Pittsgrove and Pennsauken to Woodbridge and West Orange, the state already has several Disabled Hockey programs in existence. These programs are self-sustaining. In fact, they often have an easier time raising funds than traditional programs. The challenge these programs face is access to regular ice time each week during hockey season. Ice time at the state’s 54 rinks is at a premium because preference is typically given to house, travel league and high school programs.

“Convincing these business owners to set aside ice time for disabled programs, especially ones they know little about, is a challenge,” said Andrew Schwartz. “Most rink owners, managers and decision makers within county and local governments do not understand that Disabled Hockey programs can pay their own way. We’re not looking for financial support or sympathy. Our programs just need a chance to grow, a small commitment from the rink on ice time, and little support from the community.”

Local Disabled Hockey programs also provide youth players, coaches and officials in New Jersey with compelling volunteer community service opportunities. According to Woodbridge, NJ, Mayor John McCormac: “There are many Disabled Hockey programs throughout the state that boast affiliations with established competitive youth travel hockey organizations such as the Brick Hockey Club, North Jersey Avalanche and NJ Devils Youth. I couldn’t be more proud that our very own Woodbridge Wolfpack fields both sled and special hockey programs at our state of the art Community Center.”

USA Hockey, Advocate for the Disabled

USA Hockey, Inc. is the national governing body for the sport of ice hockey in the United States. Its mission is to promote the growth of hockey in America and provide the best possible experience for all participants by encouraging, developing, advancing and administering the sport. It also proudly supports ESNJ under its Disabled Section, which recognizes four distinct disabled hockey disciplines: sled, deaf/hard of hearing, standing amputee and special hockey.

ESNJ Proudly Supported by the NHL

The National Hockey League (NHL) is a proud supporter of ESNJ. The NHL’s “Hockey is for Everyone” (HIFE) initiative provides support and unique programming to non-profit youth hockey organizations across North America that are committed to offering children of all backgrounds opportunities to play hockey. The initiative is supported by NHL member clubs – including the New Jersey Devils and Philadelphia Flyers – NHL players, alumni, and fans. To date, Hockey is for Everyone has exposed close to 45,000 boys and girls to unique hockey experiences. The American Special Hockey Association (ASHA), which provides opportunities for the developmentally disabled to participate in hockey, is the official organizer of ESNJ and is one of those NHL-sanctioned organizations under HIFE.

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