

# More than a race: Unified Track levels the playing field

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## More than a race: Unified Track levels the playing field

■ Athletes, peer models find success, connection at Central City track meet

by Elizabeth Hunter

Battling biting winds at Central City on Friday, Aurora's Unified Track team found something stronger than the cold — a growing sense of teamwork, confidence and shared success on the track. With several students placing in three different unified events, special educator and Unified Track coach Emily McCartney was proud of her students' success.

"The kids did fantastic at Central City considering the cold and wind," McCartney said.

Entering its fifth year, Unified Track has provided students with special needs the opportunity to compete alongside their peer models in four different events. This year, the students competed in long jump, 4x100 dash, 4x100 relay and the latest addition, shot put.

"That has been a nice addition," she said. "For many of my students, that has been their favorite event."

McCartney shared that this year has brought her the biggest team yet with six athletes. Along with two peer models fully dedicated to Unified Track, the coach has also brought in athletes from the Aurora track team to work with her athletes.

"This year, I have worked with Coach (Kyle) Peterson to try to integrate the unified kids a bit more as part of the track program," McCartney said. "We have used different track athletes as peer models. I think this has worked pretty well in getting more students to participate."

Both track teams have been working side by side for their respective events.

"We practice once or twice a week, and we do so simultaneously with the high school track team," McCartney said. "We are out there with lots of peers, and we practice four events."

While students focus on improving their time or distance, McCartney said the skills students work on the most are teamwork and communication.

"The competition is a piece of it, but really the social development, getting the kids into different environments and interacting with different people, is a bigger piece of it," she said.

For both athletes and peer

models, Unified Track has given them ways to work together beyond the classroom.

"One big part of Unified Track, or just being part of a sports team in general, is that kids have to learn different personalities and to get along with different people," she said. "That's sometimes challenging for some of my students.

This gives them an opportunity not only to learn a sport and participate in an athletic activity, but also to navigate social skills in a different environment besides the classroom, especially my peer models, when they don't know how to react to some of my students. It's good on both fronts, because my students who need those role models are getting that, but also my peer models are learning how to interact with someone who maybe has some social challenges."

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Coach Emily McCartney

models, Unified Track has given them ways to work together beyond the classroom. "One thing that's really interesting is with the relay, we have two athletes and two partners competing. So sometimes I'll mix up the order of which kids participate in trying to get the fastest time."

Among teammates working together at Central City were athlete Nathan Bish and peer model Carter Keasling, who said it has been a fun season competing in Unified Track.

"So far, it's been going really well," said Bish.

"It's been fun," Keasling added. "Nathan has been PR'ing."

The first events the duo competed in were long jump and shot put.

"We have been jumping pretty good today," Keasling said.

"The wind has been a factor," McCartney commented.

"It either helps us or it doesn't," Keasling added.

The duo previously competed at the Aurora Invite, with Bish's only complaint being that he got a sunburn. Quite a contrast to having to bundle up to stay warm at Central City.

"I think I was pretty sunburned at our first meet," McCartney commented. "No more sunburns today."

Bish and Keasling placed second together in the 100 meter dash. Other students who performed well and medaled included the girls 4x100 relay team, which McCartney described as a photo finish, with

runners Adelyn Van Veldhuizen, Sofia Van Veldhuizen, Lakota Von Ohlen and Ava Paulson taking home silver medals. Athlete Nolyn Fry-Drayer and peer model Korey Caudill placed second in the shot put.

"The students get excited to compete well, especially when I hand out medals," McCartney said. "Some are more competitive than others and are constantly asking how they did compared to previous meets."

McCartney said in previous years, Sammie Weddle and Connor Smith competed as a partnership at the Nebraska State Track competition.

"That was really cool, because they competed at Burke in Omaha right along with all the other kids that are at state track," she said. "That was a really cool experience to get to take those two guys and compete two years in a row."

With tough competition ahead, McCartney sees potential for some of her athletes to qualify for state, though she will not know until later in the season.

During the years Unified Track has been active in Aurora, McCartney said the community has been supportive and in awe of the students' success. She noted that former coach Jeff Sutter helped bring Unified Track to Aurora.

"Jeff Sutter was the catalyst for getting unified sports started at Aurora before I joined the teaching staff," McCartney said. "When I became the Unified Track coach, we were able to add unified events to the Aurora Invite, which has been a great way for our community to rally behind some of my athletes and support them. Many community members have asked me about unified sports just from seeing the kids at our home meet."

She noted that several of her former peer models have gone on to continue supporting unified events after high school.

"Some of the peer models I have coached in unified track have gone on to college and now look for opportunities to be involved with programs like Special Olympics," she said.

Looking forward to the final meet of the regular season, Keasling said it has been a fun season not only competing but also supporting his classmates.

"It's been really fun getting to be with all the guys, and this is really a family," Keasling said. "We really support each other over here."



News-Register/Elizabeth Hunter

Sofia Van Veldhuizen (left) congratulates her sister Adelyn, after she completed in the Unified Track shot put competition at the Central City Invite on Friday. The sisters along with Lakota Von Ohlen and Ava Paulson placed second in the girls 4x100 relay race.



News-Register/Elizabeth Hunter

Aurora Unified Track athlete Nathan Bish competed in the shot put event at Central City Friday afternoon. He, along with peer model Carter Keasling, also placed second in the 100m dash.