



PHOTOS BY HELEN L. MONTOYA/STAFF

Basketball players with Kinetic Kids learn the proper way to shoot a basketball Sept. 19. Kinetic Kids is a non-profit organization that provides sports and recreation activities to kids of all abilities.

Kinetic Kids offers sports activities for all abilities

Competitive wheelchair basketball team is set to begin its season.

By AMANDA REIMHERR
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They shoot, pass and dribble down the court — all while moving and maneuvering their wheelchairs.

The first competitive wheelchair basketball team offered by Kinetic Kids for youngsters ages 8-18 will begin its season next Tuesday.

Kinetic Kids is a nonprofit organization founded by physical therapists Kacey Wernli and Tracey Fontenot to provide "sports and recreation for all abilities."

"We both worked with children with physical and cognitive disabilities and felt very strongly that they deserved to experience the joy and benefits of childhood sports and recreation just like their peers. But there were very few options for them to do so," Wernli said.

Fontenot nodded in agreement. "We just firmly believe that all kids have a desire to compete, and in addition to the obvious benefits sports provide, competition is good for children," she said. "They learn teamwork, self-esteem and leadership skills as well as how to win and lose.

"There is a competitive spirit in us all, and these kids need to play with their peers and not always feel like the last one picked."

The nearly 5-year-old group serves more than 400 children ages 18 months to 18 years with more than 30 different activities. The organization already offers recreational basketball and wheelchair basketball, but Wernli and Fontenot decided to provide a competitive team for children who can cognitively grasp the rules and guidelines of the game.

Two teams will be offered based on age and functioning levels.

"The kids must be able to push their wheelchair independ-



Sarah Granados, 14, gets instruction on how to shoot a basketball from Scott LeBlanc as part of the Kinetic Kids program.

ently and be cognitively able to learn the sport," Fontenot said.

Both women stressed that even if the children do not play on the competitive team, they still are welcome to participate on the recreational team. The competitive team will play in local tournaments and travel around the state to others.

Children are welcome to use their own wheelchair or borrow a sport wheelchair from Kinetic Kids.

"The sport chairs are lightweight, lower to the ground and the wheels are cambered (angled)," Wernli said. "They are designed for sports."

On one recent evening, an expo and unofficial first practice was held with coach and instructor Scott LeBlanc, the assistant director of the athletic training facility at the University of the Incarnate Word. LeBlanc is a recreational therapist and has coached and taught wheelchair basketball for more than 10 years.

"I saw a need for this years ago and think that every adult and child has a God-given right to recreation and leisure," he said. "I know how much I enjoy sports, and it is a valuable point in life for everyone to experience. What sports provide makes us better members of society."

The energetic instructor tossed balls to half a dozen youngsters, directed them in drills and showed them shooting techniques. He shouted an encouraging "Let's go, let's go!" to the players as they zigzagged their chairs through a row of orange traffic cones.

"This is great for these kids because being in the chairs, they really need physical exercise and range-of-motion activities. They have got to get out, move around and get the blood flowing," he said.

Thomas Mitchell, 13, participated in the practice and said he can't wait to play in a game, even though he has played on other teams before.

"This is challenging but so fun, and I like a challenge," he said as he shot a ball and watched it swoosh through the net.

His mother Marilyn Haider said her son just lights up when he plays basketball.

"He gets to be in a team sport just like other kids and not be the minority — that is really the biggest thing. He doesn't want to just watch, he wants to play and feel the ball in his hands," she said.

LeBlanc said the children will change their playing positions according to their ability.

"Everyone has their roles on the court, just as the San Antonio Spurs do," he said with a smile.

Practices will be held 6-7 p.m. Tuesdays in the Wellness Center at the University of the Incarnate Word. The founders said the organization may offer wheelchair tennis and soccer in the future if enough children are interested.

For more information, call (210) 748-5867 or visit www.kineticickidstx.org.

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