



Graduating senior Jonah Derrick at play and at rest. *Left photo: Wendy Christiansen, right photo: Colleen Burroughs*

Jonah Derrick—Proud Unified Athlete, Leader and Friend

A new student brought a new sport to Peninsula High School, pairing varsity basketball athletes with intellectually disabled students

KRISA BRUEMMER, KP NEWS

When graduating senior Jonah Derrick began his junior year at Peninsula High School as a new student in the fall of 2018, he told his parents he missed his athletic team back in Colorado, part of the worldwide Special Olympics Unified Sports program.

Less than two years later, as Jonah graduated from PHS as a member of the Class of 2020, he left behind the legacy of having started the first Unified Sports team on the peninsula, which pairs student athletes who have intellectual disabilities with partners who help them play competitive sports.

“We are so proud of him!” Amy Whipple Derrick wrote in a Facebook tribute to her graduating son. “He is a special ed. student and was the driving force behind getting Unified Sports sponsored this year at PHS.”

For Jonah’s senior year, a full roster of 15 players formed the new, Unified Seahawks basketball team, which went on to finish second in the district.

Jonah said one of the highlights of his high school experience was scoring the winning point in their first game.

“Our boys varsity basketball team was

there that day and so was their coach,” Jonah said. “It’s something I’ll never forget. I was so overwhelmed with emotions, it was mind-blowing.”

There would have been a Unified Seahawks soccer season, if not for the school closure.

Jonah’s dad, John Derrick said, “When we moved here, Jonah and I talked and I said, ‘If you really want Unified Sports here, you’re going to have to put in the work but I’ll help you.’ So, we reached out to Special Olympics and they responded very quickly and enthusiastically.”

Derrick said the school far exceeded his expectations in terms of support. “I can’t say enough positive things about Peninsula High School,” he said. “The leadership really listened to Jonah and let him take a leadership role.”

PHS Special Education Teacher Wendy Christiansen said training and playing together on the inclusive team has helped build lasting friendships and inspired students to stretch their limits.

“I’m really proud of Jonah. He has worked very hard and not only has he received good friendship from the kids

there, but he’s attempted to be a good friend as well, so it’s well deserved,” Derrick said. “This is probably the most outstanding group of young men and women I’ve ever encountered. The way they bonded as a team and supported everybody on the team and conducted themselves with class and integrity and maturity, they’re just an outstanding group of students.”

Jonah said he remembers feeling completely lost on his first day at PHS.

“I was just standing there trying to find my way around and this kid came up

to me and offered to help me,” he said. “In the following days, I realized I was already starting to make friends left and right

and getting to know them. Everyone I’ve met has been there for me no matter what I was going through. They really changed my life.

“The teacher that has always been there for me is Miss Wendy,” Jonah said. “I will also miss my coach. She has not only helped me, but she has always been so kind and generous and gone out of her way and taken her time to make this all happen for me, and to see me reach my

goals and my dreams come true.”

In addition to basketball, Jonah loves horseback riding and playing tennis. He is also an avid football fan. Art, P.E., and guitar were some of his favorite PHS classes.

“The thing that I miss the most is being able to walk down those school halls one last time and say goodbye to my teachers and thank them for all the support and all they’ve done for me,” Jonah said of graduating during the school closure. “I’d like to take one last look at everything and all the memories I made there, in what was a completely new environment for me that I’ve grown to love and cherish.

“I enjoy this moment knowing that I’m leaving behind something greater than myself,” he said. “This is the beginning of a new chapter for me. I’m trying to pursue new things and go wherever the wind takes me, as far as I can go.”

Jonah is excited that PHS has asked him to return to help with the Unified Sports program next year.

“Ever since I started playing basketball, I’ve wanted to become a sports coach,” Jonah said. “I believe I can do the impossible and nothing can stop me as long as I have a team and family to support me.”

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