

DOWNERS GROVE

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District 99 players celebrate a recent state championship at Illinois State University.

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STATE SUCCESS

District 99 special needs students bring home two basketball trophies

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ELMHURST

Two basketball teams from Community High School District 99 took home state trophies recently in a competition that has been life-changing for the special needs participants.

"My boyfriend and I cry because it is so amazing to watch these children light up, how much it means to them," said Serena Garcia, mother of 16-year-old Ziggy Markowski, a member of a Special Olympics basketball team representing the district.

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The team is made up of Downers Grove North, Downers Grove South and Transition 99 Program students with special needs ages 18 to 22. Garcia said all players are evaluated at the beginning of the season in October, when coaches meet with parents, and players are placed on one of four teams matching their skill level.

D99 Hoops Team 1 and 2 both won their district tournaments and went on to capture first place in their divisions during the Special Olympics basketball tournament from March 17 through 19 at Illinois State University in Bloomington.

Team 2 head coach Arthur Drenth, who is also a Transition 99 teacher, said seeing the athletes accomplish something they weren't able to do before and develop socially, emotionally and physically was a great reward.

"It's very competitive," Drenth said. "The athletes know the difference between winning and losing. We want everyone to have fun, but acknowledge it's a competition and emphasize do your best."

The coach said the program recently had expanded to four teams, which helped coaches field a stronger set of players overall.

Garcia, whose son has Asperger's Syndrome, said the players decided at the beginning of the season that they wanted to finish on top.

"The parents could see the difference," she said. "You could see it in their hearts. They fought very hard for this."

Garcia said coach Michael Folsom first encouraged her son to join a D99 Hoops team his freshman year in 2015. She said he had never played basketball before and "didn't want to stay with it at first" because of the challenges of so much exercise and the feeling of being overwhelmed by starting high school and joining a number of activities.

"We just kept encouraging him to take on as much as you can," Garcia said. "When he started meeting kids



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D99 Hoops Team 1 player Charles Huddleston dribbles past a defender during a recent game on the team's run to a state championship at Illinois State University.

from other schools, they all took him in. It didn't matter if you're terrible. That's what made him stay was the support. It doesn't matter if you can't make a basket. If someone from another

team falls, the kids stop and help. The camaraderie is incredible."

Garcia said the experience has impacted her son physically and emotionally, excitedly praising his defense and

■ **D99 HOOPS TEAM 1:** Anton Allen, John Anderson, Charles Huddleston, Demond Perry and Jose Rosario. Coaches: Kevin Ahrens, Jack Cannon and Michael McGinnis.

■ **D99 HOOPS TEAM 2:** Jeremiah Boatright, Bradley Brennan, Isabella Coloka, Jose Ferrer, Philip Gonzales, Tom Maloney, Ziggy Markowski, Antonio Murphy, Alexander Newell, Malik Nicholson, Othon Ramirez and Raul Roman.

■ **COACHES:** Arthur Drenth, Michael Folsom and students Alexa Vitagliano and Brendon Harrison

noting that joining the team "really made him a lot more social, a lot more outgoing, a lot more vocal."

"It's given my son a lot of confidence in himself," she said. "He's got a learning disability and gets down on himself for that. When he gets on a court, he excels, and it's incredible."

Drenth said coaching the teams took plenty of patience and organizational skills, particularly because of the high level of communication needed for parents on the teams.

Ultimately, he said, it's all worth it during those times when he's "interacting with the athletes and seeing how much the students love the game." He credited his players and parents for their dedication throughout the year as well as support from the rest of the district.

"We had both building principals come out to games, and the superintendent came out to state," he said. "In our district people with special needs are really treated as equal peers by everyone – students, administrations, teachers."

Garcia said the coaches also deserved plenty of credit.

"I want the coaches to be recognized," Garcia said. "They don't get paid extra. They are incredible, loving, amazing coaches and teachers."