

# 'The sky's the limit' for Special Olympians

Smiles and sportsmanship were on display Saturday in Windsor.

By JEFF DEWEES

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Members of the York County Special Olympics softball team hold a strategy meeting while the Susquehanna League team brings out a pinch-hitter Saturday. (Daily Record/Sunday News - Kate Penn)

Self-esteem can be found in the strangest places.

Self-esteem can be found in a dribbler up the middle. In a pop fly that lands safely in the outfield. With a tag-out at home plate.

With a swing and a miss from an opposing batter.

At the end of the day, that's what it's all about.

That's what Dwayne Neff and company provide each year at Windsor.

Once a year, Neff's York County Special Olympics softball team takes on a squad of Susquehanna League players, following a regularly scheduled league game, in a softball contest.

"It really builds their self-esteem up," Neff said of the game -- "won" for the third straight year by the Special Olympians, 15-1.

"They get such a high from watching these players from the Susquehanna League compete, and then getting to play them," Neff said. "It's unbelievable for them. And I think it raises awareness for the players and clubs around the Susquehanna League, and the county in general."

Funny how feared Windsor slugger Nate Neumann can't seem to find his swing against the York Countians, as the Special Olympics softball team is known. He's never had a hit against them.

"I'm 0-for-the-century," Neumann mused from behind the backstop, in between at-bats.

The first year of the annual game, in 2006, Neff saw contributions from a couple of teams besides Windsor.

Saturday, for the second straight year, all 10 league clubs pledged financial support.

"It's unbelievable what you can accomplish when you get a good group of people behind you," Neff said. "It's amazing. The sky's the limit. Sometimes, you've gotta start out small and work your way up, and that's what we're doing."

Neff, the Central Pennsylvania Autism Field Coordinator by day for the state's Youth Advocate Programs, doubles as the York County Special Olympians' head coach.

He's in his second year. The annual Windsor fundraiser he founded is in its third.

Neff's players give as much back to him as he gets from them.



Jamie Dewalt watches his teammates play during Saturday's exhibition softball game in Windsor between the York County Special Olympics softball team and players from the Susquehanna League. (Daily Record/Sunday News - Kate Penn)

"It's very rewarding for me," he said. "I could be in the worst mood of my life and then go to practice and be with these guys, and I have a smile on my face afterwards. All my worries go away, and I feel so much better after being with these athletes."

Saturday's event -- held under brilliant blue skies -- raised \$490 in raffle ticket sales alone by the third inning of the Susquehanna League game, featuring Windsor and Red Lion.

The record-setting raffle desk was manned by a pair of waitresses from Hooters of York.

"I'm a big fan myself," Neff said of the local restaurant. "I just built a good relationship with them. I started talking about some of the things I do, and (they) said, 'What can we do for you?'"

This year's program featured 20 Special Olympic athletes, ranging in age from 12 to 55.

In addition, for the first time, other field coordinators from the county branch of the Youth Advocate Programs -- an organization that counsels mostly court-ordered at-risk youth -- were in attendance.

YAP set up sand and face-painting booths that were swarmed by every kid in attendance, it seemed.

"What better way to get our (kids) involved in community service than to help out with Special Olympics," Amy Neff -- Dwayne's sister and a YAP coordinator -- said. "It opens their eyes. For me, it's important to dig down and bring out their good qualities and expand their horizons."