

Olympians to play Tigers

If Detroit Tiger Alan Trammell is feeling out of place playing center field for the Tigers, he could ask a Farmington Hills resident for some pointers. He could ask Kirk Mason, who plays center field for the Oakland Express, a Special Olympics team representing Oakland County. Mason, along with 11 other team members, five coaches and 15 parents, will pay a call on Sparky Anderson and his team at their spring training camp in Lakeland Florida on March 18 for a joint practice. The Express is not just another amateur team. It won the state championship last season and finished fourth in the state out of 60 teams in 1991. "I'll be nervous at first," Mason said. "If they get used to it, I'll get used to it. Then we'll have a ball." The event will mark the first time a Special

Olympics team has practiced with a major league club, said Todd Lipa, the Express coach. The team has several representatives from the Farmington area and is part of a growing Special Olympics effort. Team Farmington, which boasts more than 140 special athletes, has a year round program that includes sports for boys and girls and adults. Team Farmington hosted a basketball tournament on Feb. 27 and bowling at Drake's Lanes on Sunday. Team members have won state championships in skiing, weight lifting and softball and need more coaches and volunteers for a growing program. Anyone interested in volunteering for Special Olympics in the Farmington area can call Todd Lipa at 855-0632.



Special Olympians: Chris Radlof (left) and Kirk Mason say they have built confidence and found acceptance through their Special Olympics activities.

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of Walled Lake and about 140 other Special Olympians have found the same satisfaction as members of Team Farmington. Special Olympics, which provides athletic and recreation programs for mentally challenged children and adults, is 25 years old. It has continued to grow as more people become involved as athletes and coaches. "Once you see the program and see the kids, you're hooked," said Lipa, a Farmington Hills resident and Special Olympics coach since 1985.

■ 'My dad wanted me to be in regular athletics. But when he found out what I wanted, he said, "It's your life. Do what you want."'

*Kirk Mason
Special Olympian*

resident who joined Team Farmington as a softball coach two years ago, said the experience was much different than coaching adult softball teams.

"These kids are so coachable," Sterns said. "They can't wait to do what ever you ask of them. They're very sportsmanlike. They never quit."

"Once you get that first hug, it's all over," Sterns said.

Mike Todorov, a special education teacher at Farmington High School and Special Olympics coach, said Team Farmington was developed last year as a way of organizing what has become a large athletic program.

"We're always looking for more coaches and volunteers," he said. "We depend on private contributions to run our program and it's just getting bigger."

Todorov said Special Olympics gives back to the community much more than a warm feeling. It helps people who might otherwise remain couch potatoes be-

come fit, gain confidence, build skills that often help them get jobs, and gain social acceptance.

"Some of these kids start out and they just aren't fit," Todorov said. "It takes some stamina to perform at a job."

And teaching skills like teamwork will help Special Olympians like Kirk and Chris work after they've graduated from high school.

"There is too much pressure in general sports sometimes for kids to go on and compete in college," Todorov said. "If you take sports as anything more than teaching skills, making better people and having fun, then it's too much pressure."

But if the Special Olympics experience is teaching kids anything, it's been an eye opener for adults.

"Sometimes I wonder how mentally handicapped some of these kids are," Lipa said. "I think how the weakest or disadvantaged are treated is a measure of how civilized a country is. Whatever we spend in time and money on these kids is more than paid back because they go on to work and contribute rather than stay in an institution."

And even though Chris Radlof plans to work after high school and Kirk Mason is thinking of college in his future, they both plan to continue their involvements with Special Olympics. "I'll be old and gray," said Kirk Mason.

Lipa, who coached last year's Oakland Express softball team to a state championship in the top skill division of Special Olympics, said he was amazed at the abilities of Special Olympians. "I didn't know quite what to expect," he said. "I was like most people, I saw the pictures on TV, but didn't know what they were like. They just get to a certain level and they can't learn those little skills to go on to the next level," he said. "They learn. It just takes them longer." That has been a common experience of many coaches in Special Olympics. New coaches quickly learn that these special athletes usually try harder and wear their emotions on their sleeve more than do their mainstream counterparts.

Special experiences
Ted Sterns, a Farmington Hills

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