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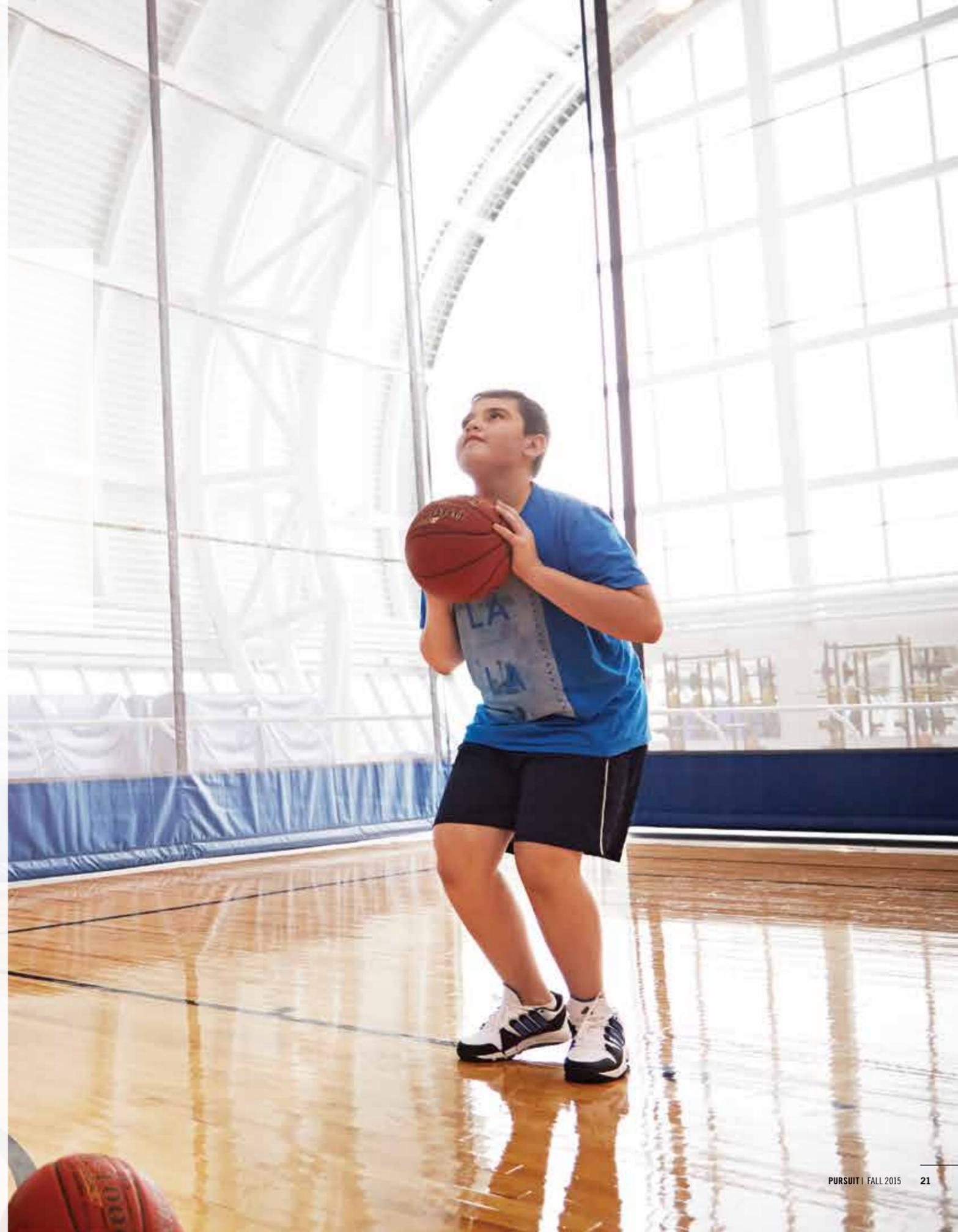
SPORT IN A NEW LIGHT

INCREASING OPPORTUNITY FOR UNDERSERVED KIDS

BY VALERIE IANCOVICH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEED9

Ryan Vieira bursts through the doors of Whitby's Abilities Centre like he owns the place and makes a beeline for the gym. Ryan is a dynamic child – bright, curious and very gracious. But this confidence in a sport setting is a relatively new development.

Like other children who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, Ryan has struggled with discovering his social self. According to a 2012 study out of the University of Windsor, 53 per cent of children with a disability have no friends. "Ryan was doing absolutely fantastic in school and just being out and about in the community. But I noticed that he was playing a lot by himself and while that's okay when you're little, as you get older, socializing becomes much more important," his mother Lisa says of her now 12-year-old son. So when she heard about the Igniting Fitness Possibilities (IFP) pilot project, launched by KPE researcher Professor Kelly Arbour-Nicitopoulos and Bloorview Research Institute senior scientist Dr. Virginia Wright, Lisa was immediately compelled to enrol Ryan.



The first IFP pilot was launched in 2013 when Arbour-Nicitopoulos, who has extensive experience working with adults with physical disabilities, found that there was a void in programs available for children and youth with disabilities. Keen to collaborate with colleagues at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, Arbour-Nicitopoulos partnered with Professor Wright, a leader in the field of pediatric rehabilitation. Working with Wright and programming specialists at U of T and Holland Bloorview, the team created an initiative that they believe will fill this gap and provide underserved children and youth with opportunities to discover their love of movement and develop their social skills.

“When I joined the Faculty in January 2013 I decided to expand my research program to include children and youth with physical disabilities,” Arbour-Nicitopoulos explains. “Gradually through the IFP program, my research has gone well beyond physical disabilities, and I attribute much of this shift to my experience with IFP and working with kids with other types of abilities, like Ryan, who has autism. We never wanted IFP to be a program only for kids with physical disabilities,” she explains. “That’s what makes IFP different; it is not another program exclusively for children with disabilities – it’s inclusive.” So far, pilots have been run at Variety Village and at Ryan’s stomping grounds, Abilities Centre.

The IFP program is designed for children and youth in grades 4 to 12 from across a full spectrum of abilities. What they all share is little to no experience in sport and physical activity. IFP kids are taught the fundamentals of movement, eventually gaining the skills they need to participate in programs they want to join in the broader community. Researchers predict this will lead to a significant confidence boost, an improved social life and a healthy and lifelong love of being active.



“When I watched Ryan participate in the curriculum, I could see the organizers were so creative.”

The IFP program begins with a 16-week “QuickStart” segment that teaches kids about fitness and assesses their physical strengths and limitations. They get a chance to learn the foundational skills required for various types of sports and are exposed to collaborative games. “We’ve worked with an instructor, Tricia Finlay, here at KPE, using an approach called ‘teaching games for understanding,’” Arbour-Nicitopoulos explains. This philosophy groups sports and activities into categories. Kids learn about territory games, target games, net/wall games and movement pursuits which allows them to make connections they might otherwise miss. For example, a child may discover that she loves archery and that could inspire her to try other activities in that same category, like golf or bowling.

Children and youth make these discoveries while also establishing social connections and bonds with peers in the program, and youth leaders especially. Ryan really hit it off with his mentor Chad who, like others in his role, works with youth in the program to identify activities they enjoy and helps them develop the related skills. Many of these coaches are KIN students or other aspiring leaders in the sport and

recreation community. “It’s a very safe place to be,” explains Arbour-Nicitopoulos. “When I watched Ryan participate in the curriculum, I could see the organizers were so creative,” Lisa says, pointing to their method of teaching Frisbee-golf as an example of their innovative approach. “Before they taught the kids how to play the game, they started by teaching them how to throw a Frisbee. I tried several times to show him that. But the way they did it, these young girls and guys, they were just at Ryan’s level. They were having a social, fun time; it didn’t feel like that typical ‘instruction’ time.”

Lisa and her husband have had ample exposure to other more conventional sport and physical activity programs for youth with autism. “In our previous experiences, the organizers would say, ‘We are meeting at this gym or this park at this time and we’re going to play soccer.’ And they’d throw a ball out into the field and it would go nowhere. It wasn’t simply that the kids don’t know how to play soccer, but they don’t know how to kick a ball, period. It’s very difficult for others who are outside of it to understand that. It’s not that these kids don’t understand the game; they just don’t have these fundamental skills.”



"Chad would be in eyesight, but he wasn't playing directly with Ryan. It was about building that confidence and then taking a backseat to let Ryan thrive."

Once children and youth in the IFP program develop these basic skills and begin to discover their preferences and strengths in the "QuickStart" stage of the program, they move into the "Give it a Try" phase. Coaches, like Chad, help participants to transition into activity and sport programs of their choice in their local recreation and community centres.

This was a seamless transition for Ryan. While he still enjoys going to the centre when Chad is working, he's become more independent in sport and at play. During the "Give it a Try" stage, Chad quietly phased himself out of activities when he saw that Ryan was doing well with kids his own age. "Chad would be in eyesight," Lisa recounts. "But he wasn't playing directly with Ryan. It was about building that confidence and then taking a backseat to let Ryan thrive."

In fact, Ryan took so well to the Abilities Centre's environment and their programs that Lisa was inspired to invest in a membership for the whole family. And Chad still makes an effort to pop by the gym when Ryan and his family are around to share tips on shooting and dribbling.

A new IFP pilot launched this fall through U of T's Junior Blues program. "We were inspired to add IFP to the Junior Blues program as part of our commitment to physical activity and health for all children," says Jen Leake, director of children and youth programming at U of T. "Children with disabilities have far fewer opportunities to learn how to be physically active; if you don't learn these skills as a child or youth, you're

less likely to enjoy physical activity as an adult." And while starting children young is valuable, Leake points out that youth of high school age can also be underserved, especially if they aren't already involved in the world of sport and recreation. "Being active helps youth to manage their stress, builds new friendships and increases academic success. When Kelly [Arbour-Nicitopoulos] proposed Junior Blues as a pilot site for the IFP, I was really excited to partner with her. Being able to participate actively in an ongoing research program and apply that research to IFP and across the Junior Blues program is hugely valuable." On top of the countless benefits to the children and youth are the rich opportunities the program provides to the university students who are implementing the curriculum. "KPE students are excited about the opportunity to teach children with a spectrum of abilities and to put their academic courses into action."

Long term, Arbour-Nicitopoulos and Wright would like to see the IFP curricula continue to expand and improve. "We are hoping to do 10 pilots by the end of two years," she explains. "The team would like to create a manual and staff training guidelines and package this all in a way that we can share with organizations outside of the University and Holland Bloorview." Arbour-Nicitopoulos will be happy when the program is self-sustaining. "I want to make sure we are providing a tool kit to our peers and know with confidence that it works. Then we can say that we have really, truly made an impact when IFP can be run out of schools or recreation centres all over the province and the country."

For Ryan and his family, the impact of the IFP program has already been positive and very real. It's been over six months since Ryan started the program, but his mother says his transformation has been astounding and far-reaching.

Ryan is no longer the boy who tries to connect with his friends using formal handshakes, nor is he wary about picking up a basketball at school. "Now, I see him with his peers and he is interacting in a way that's just much more age appropriate. He can respond to the 'Hey man! What's ups' with fist pumps and everything. And that's new since the IFP program." Ryan's overall anxiety about school has virtually disappeared. As the summer of 2015 drew to a close, Lisa asked Ryan how he felt about going back. "He usually dreads it. This year he can't wait to go back because the teacher is male and a sports enthusiast and Ryan associates that with the IFP program and how much fun it was. I also asked him what his favourite subject is. I thought he'd say art because he's a very good artist, but this time he said, 'Gym!' "I really can't say enough about the inclusiveness and the quality of this [IFP] program! It's been a real game-changer for us." **P**

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