

BASKETBALL FOR EVERYONE

WHEN PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY AND CLUB PLAYERS PLAY BASKETBALL TOGETHER THIS MEANS GREAT MOMENTS FOR EVERYBODY. GERMAN BASKETBALL MAGAZINE FIVE VISITED SUCH A MIXED GROUP IN HAGEN.

WRITTEN BY: Sven Simon, TRANSLATION: Nora Brunzlik



It is a scene we all know from our sports biography: a small school hall, a triple line, which ends in the lateral wall, sticky air, a few parents showing up too early to pick up their kids and approximately 20 young people, 10 marked in blue and yellow shirts are just concentrated on the final training game.

Patrick Jänsch is sitting outside waiting for the next game of his team. In the last game he scored the most points for his squad, and now he talks about his favourite sport. He says that he is not really interested in the NBA, but in the past he visited quite often games of Phoenix Hagen in the Bundesliga, Germany's first league. But recently he likes it more to play basketball himself than watching a game, because the most beautiful thing in basketball is of course, when you are scoring yourself. He does not care whether the ball smoothly goes through the net or just slips in touching it adds the 21-year-old being asked: "The main thing, it's going in, right?"

Jänsch has already achieved a lot in basketball. He participated in the 2007 Special Olympics World Games in China with his friends Pascal Becker, Dennis Willing and Damir Kajtazaj. In 2006 they also won a gold medal at the Special Olympics European Youth Games in Rome and were invited to sign the golden book of their home town Hagen. In China they only made a bronze medal, but the finalists England and Australia were as he says, "definitely better than us". Quite amazing were also the trips with the team bus at that time, adds Becker. "In front of us and behind us a police car and then we drove with flashing lights and police escort to the hall - that was cool." Next summer their goal are the World Games again, this time in Greece.

All three came to basketball in the same way: through their teacher, Heinz-Werner Schmunz. The 58-year-old was an active player himself in the Bundesliga with Hagen for ten years and won the German championship in 1974. Today he is a teacher at the Gustav-Heinemann-School in Hagen. He started a basketball group in this special school for intellectual development to stay with his sport despite of crunching bones. He says that, even if the success in sport does not have the same importance as before, he sees how his students enjoy the regional and national competitions of Special Olympics, in particular the World Games that are taking place every four years.

Athletes and Partners

There are about 200 million people with intellectual disabilities in the world. Most of them live on the margins of society. Special Olympics is a movement that has set itself the goal to improve the respect, acceptance and the integration of those people. And what could be more suitable to reach that than sport? Everyone understands the universal language of the game of basketball, which let differences disappear. More than 500,000 people with intellectual disabilities got involved in sport through this movement in Europe and Eurasia, including about 53,000 basketball players.

What are the next goals in basketball? Even more cooperation with the clubs and the national and international organizations to find more coaches, expand women's basketball and to push the project "Unified Basketball" forward. There athletes with intellectual disabilities play together with partners from local sports clubs. Schmunz was thrilled when he heard about it, and convinced Björn Wehrauch of the local club BBV Hagen, to start a trial with the U18 team. Now they have been training together regularly for five months. Marcus Höhn who is coach of the youth team does exercises with them that every basketball player knows from the beginning on like lay-up-drills and criss-cross with three players up to the center line and then two-against-one back. "Of course we were all a little insecure at the beginning, but this passed quickly", says Tim Vespermann of the U18 team. "Sometimes an exercise needs to be demonstrated a bit slower, but actually we are surprised of how good some of the guys are." The best example of this is Jänsch, whose drive to the basket is not different from them of the players in the local club ... okay, maybe he starts his penetrations to the hole often with one quick step and the following dribbling coming a little bit late, but so what: the millionaires in the NBA do that, too.

How much differences vanish in basketball is shown as Jänsch und Christoph Bause, the tallest player of the U18, fight for a rebound in the zone after a missed shot. At the beginning Bause uses only half of his power, but his counterpart, who is almost 20 inches smaller, does not care: Jänsch wants the ball and pulls with all his energy. The result: The tall man of the U18 gives his best, too, the shorter one is hurled to the ground, and the game runs into the other direction.

Looking at this scene Schmunz is laughing with his usual dirty grin and clap-

WHAT IS INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY?

Finding a precise definition for the term "intellectual disability" is more than difficult. According to the American Association on Mental Retardation a person has an intellectual disability if the following three criteria are given: "The degree of intellectual function (IQ) is below 70-75, at least two skills for daily life (adaptation abilities) require assistance, and the disability occurred before the age of 18." The official press kit of the Special Olympics Germany National Games in Bremen 2010 describes "Intellectual disability" as: "It is not a disease. Intellectual disability means primarily an impairment of intellectual capacity, but not in the ability to feel joy, happiness or disappointment. Nowadays the development-oriented perspective is predominant in sciences. Not the "defect" is dominating, but each person's individual potential for development. People with intellectual disabilities can develop and they can be educated."

ping. "It should be like this", says the former center, who liked to bang under the baskets back in his days. "The guys do not want to be treated differently. To play with them very carefully would be the first step to exclusion." In such moments the benefit of the project for the club players is shown: The guys learn to reduce their inhibitions and insecurity towards people with intellectual disabilities. Schmunz sees tearing down prejudices and learning social engagement as an important experience for the club athletes. "We see, too, how much fun the guys have, and it gives oneself also a good feeling," says Vespermann. This is also the most important point for Mary Davis, Manager of Special Olympics in Europe. "We invite every person to participate with us, because you can change a life. And it will also change your life."

Unified team in the local league

The Euroleague and FIBA Europe support the Unified Program. In connection with the European Basketball week of Special Olympics Europe and Eurasia, for example, 20 Euroleague games across Europe were devoted to the slogan "Basketball for Everyone" in November 2009. The professional players wore shirts promoting Special Olympics, and the captain of the home team talked to the fans about the need for respect, acceptance and integration of people with intellectual disabilities before the tip-off. In addition to this, there were approximately 200 events across Europe: tournaments and training courses for trainers, who work in the field, invitations for athletes with intellectual disabilities to watch a professional team during training or a game. With the support of the ULEB also a lot of "Unified Basketball" events were taking place this year around the Final Four of the Euroleague in Paris. Euroleague sees it as an obligation to use the popularity of the teams and professionals, "to assist those of our society who really need it", says Jordi Bertomeu, Commissioner of the Euroleague. "There are millions of persons with intellectual disabilities in Europe, but often they are still overlooked. We must change the way in which society thinks and acts towards people with intellectual disabilities."

The project of Schmunz and BBV Hagen is an example for how to use the existing structures to launch permanent training groups. In southern Germany, especially in Bruckberg near Ansbach, there have already been existing mixed training groups for a long time. In contrast to that, the Unified Team of the BBV Hagen and Gustav-Heinemann-school recently had its first competition at a street ball tournament in Hagen: In the regular field of competitors, the boys made it to the quarterfinals. Schmunz is dreaming of a Unified team competing in a regular league outside official counting. After discussions with the National Association a team under the name BBV-Unified Team will start playing in the next season in one of the local minor leagues. When Schmunz talks about it, he is beaming with pride. He also hopes that he can realise to organize a unified team for the World Games in Greece next year. Before that they have to compete against and beat the other team in the national qualification, which includes the well-established teams from the South of the Republic. At the moment this is a big issue for the boys from the U18 team. "I have never been to Greece", says Vespermann grinning. Ambition is probably stimulated ... sven@fivemag.de