

Minnesota pioneers prep adapted sports competition

by [Access Press Staff](#) // November 10th, 2015

The 2015-2016 academic year marks the centennial of the Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL). Although high schools fielded sports teams in Minnesota as long ago as the 1870s, a sustainable statewide group wasn't put into place until 1916. That's when the Minnesota State High School Athletic Association was formed.

A committee of superintendents, led by H.C. Bell of Luverne, drew up plans for the association in 1914. The group was formally organized two years later, with the mission of promoting amateur sports and establishing uniform eligibility rules for interscholastic activities. Bell served as the association's first president, from 1916 to 1922.

By the 1930s the association had grown to include debate and speech and all interscholastic athletics. But in the 1930s and 1940s, sports were deemed too strenuous for girls. Girls' sports were replaced with intramural sports at individual schools. It would not be until 1970 that girls' sports would be restored, which predated the Title IX amendment.

By that time the pressure was building to add adapted sports, so that students with disabilities could join in the fun and gain the health benefits. More than 45 years ago, students with disabilities at Minneapolis' Marshall High asked for the chance to play floor hockey. They wrote their own rules, adapted for athletes with disabilities. Soon adapted soccer was added. One of those students was Jim Christy, who has cerebral palsy.

The Minnesota Adapted Athletics Association (MAAA) was founded in 1969, to provide youth with disabilities the same opportunity as other students enjoy the benefits of a quality high school sports program. The association provides support, scheduling, and playoff ratings for the sports of soccer, floor hockey, and softball.

In 1992, the MSHSL accepted a proposal from MAAA to become the first high school activity association in the nation to sponsor adapted athletic programs. The first state championships under the MSHSL umbrella began in 1994.

Schools compete in adapted floor hockey, softball, soccer and bowling. Teams compete in divisions for cognitive and physical disabilities. In spring 2016 the bowling competition will feature a third division, for athletes with autism spectrum disorder. Athletes with disabilities can also compete in track and field events.

Christy went on to earn degrees from the University of Minnesota and Utah State University. He is a longtime coach and teacher at Minneapolis South High School, and has worked with many adapted sports teams. He helped write the rules used in adapted hockey. He has long been active in MAAA and in 2009 was inducted into the MSHSL Hall of Fame.

Christy is just one of many people who has played a role in prep adapted sports history. The Robins of Robbinsdale-Hopkins-Mound/Westonka schools have won many state championships,

under the leadership of Marcus Onsum. Many others have coached and helped teams get the equipment and support they need.

Minnesota is the first state in the United States where student athletes with disabilities can be on a sports team and earn varsity letters in sports, thanks to the MSHSL and MAAA.

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.