

Unified

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sons, taking Winthrop to the 2003 Western Maine Class C crown.

The satisfaction these veteran coaches are deriving from their unified basketball tenures is different but no less rewarding.

“The key to this is that it’s more about the kids going out there, having fun and being involved with other kids in a competitive-type environment,” said Hill, who also is the athletic administrator at Messalonskee. “Really a lot of it from both sides is making sure the kids have a good experience.”

“The wins and losses are very secondary to everything else we’re getting out of it,” he said.

Vachon, both a Maine Basketball Hall of Fame and Maine Sports Hall of Fame inductee, had no hesitation about coaching his school’s unified team when approached before last season.

“I’ve taught middle school and elementary school, and in my classrooms I’ve experienced the world of special-needs children, so for me it was easy to adjust to because they’re kids who love to play,” said Vachon, who is Cony’s athletic administrator.

“It’s fun, and not only that, it’s very rewarding in many different ways. I’m enjoying it tremendously,” he said.

Maine’s unified basketball program, founded by a partnership among the Maine Principals’ Association, Special Olympics of Maine and Project Unify, a branch of Special Olympics dedicated to increasing athletic and leadership opportunities for students with and without intellec-

tual disabilities, has nearly doubled this winter from the 17 schools that participated in the inaugural 2014-15 season.

Within that growth comes varying approaches regarding the competitive level of the sport from school to school.

“The wins and losses are very secondary to everything else we’re getting out of it.”

TOMMY HILL, COACH

“With Vach and me and Tommy who have been varsity coaches, this is a wonderful thing, and for the most part we walk a fine line because we want our kids to compete but not be overly competitive at the expense of the other team,” said Lindlof. “We’re always mindful of the needs of the other team when it comes to competition, and competition takes a back seat to being able to celebrate the success the kids have whether it’s our team or the other team.”

“For these kids being in the moment, being in the competitive arena, being part of a team and celebrating achievement are what it’s about,” he said.

Unified basketball rules mandate that at least 75 percent of the points in each game are scored by the student-athletes, rather than the helpers.

At Waterville, the student partners are encouraged to focus more on passing and rebounding, leaving the vast majority of the scoring to the student-athletes.

“Our kids get excited when we score a lot,” said Lindlof. “There’s reason for celebration when someone scores a basket because it’s not an easy thing to do.”



BREWSTER BURNS

Lisbon’s Robert Wood drives to the basket against Hampden Academy’s Ted Harris in the unified basketball state final in March 2015. Some former varsity coaches are now involved coaching unified teams.

At Cony, the student partners are already established as peer helpers who also support the unified student-athletes in the classroom.

“Last year in a game I had five athletes out there at one time,” said Vachon. “The opposing coach looked at me and said, ‘You can’t do that, you need two peer helpers out there.’ I told him my athletes were better basketball players than my peer helpers, and it was true.”

The primary goals these coaches share in guiding their unified teams are to teach their players the sport and to help create a positive experience for all involved.

“I place a premium on skill development,” said Lindlof. “When we go to practice, we work on dribbling right-handed, dribbling left-handed, catching the ball with two hands, the basics. Today I saw two of my kids dribble with their left hands on the left side and then try to shoot a left-handed layup, and it was pretty gratifying to see them attempt to do what we’re teaching them in practice.”

Such cause for celebration for these coaches often stems from circumstances less obvious than a play well executed.

“The thing that’s nice to see is kids coming out of their shells who were

scared to death to go on the court last year,” said Hill. “They’re now excited to be out there, they want to be out there, and they’ve improved to the point where they can do more things.”

“That’s good to see at any coaching level, but watching these kids succeed and have a good experience becomes indescribable at times,” he said.

That Hill, Vachon and Lindlof came back to the sport that gave them such satisfaction earlier in their coaching careers in this new capacity really should come as no surprise. It’s just one more chance to return to their professional roots.

“I think we’re all just teachers teaching,” said Vachon. “I’ve always said that about coaches, that we’re teachers, and it’s very rewarding to see someone improve throughout the year whether it’s from playing basketball or reading a book.”

“It’s just as exciting for me to see a kid hit a shot now as it was when I was coaching my girls team. If a kid hits a [3-pointer], you’ll see me just as vocal and excited on the sideline as I was before. My philosophy hasn’t changed as far as excitement and enthusiasm is concerned, it’s probably even raised up a notch.”

Chapman sorry for ‘use of the gun’

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

Speaking through an interpreter before the New York Yankees began spring training exhibition play on Wednesday, closer Aroldis Chapman said he exercised bad judgment using a handgun in an alleged domestic dispute last October.

“I’m apologizing because of the use of the gun,” said Chapman, who was suspended for the first 30 games by Major League Baseball because of the incident, he learned Tuesday. “It was bad judgment on my part. But I also want to say that I never hurt my girlfriend. I want this to be very clear.”

Chapman’s girlfriend accused him of choking her, but the former Cincinnati Reds All-Star reliever denied causing the woman any harm and no charges were filed in the case. Police in Davie, Florida, said the alleged victim did not fully cooperate and some accounts conflicted, which caused the dead end in the investigation.

Chapman is in the final year of his contract but will not take the field for a regular-season game until May 9.

He came to the Yankees via trade with the Reds in December, several weeks after the framework of a deal to send Chapman to the Los Angeles Dodgers fell apart under the weight of the domestic violence allegations.

2B Wong signs 5-year deal

The St. Louis Cardinals reached agreement with sec-

ond baseman Kolten Wong on a five-year contract Wednesday.

Financial terms were not disclosed, but the deal will pay Wong \$25.5 million, according to ESPN. The deal also has a \$12.5 million team option for 2021 and does not include any no-trade protection.

The 25-year-old Wong batted .262 with 11 home runs, 61 RBIs and 15 stolen bases last season.

Wong was the Cardinals’ first-round draft choice in 2011 out of the University of Hawaii and made his major league debut just two years later in 2013 as a member of the National League championship team.

The left-handed hitting Wong finished third in 2014 NL Rookie of the Year voting and he was the Cardinals Organizational Player of the Year in 2013. In 295 career games, Wong has posted a .250 batting average with 23 home runs, 103 RBIs and 38 stolen bases.

After hitting 12 home runs in 2014 and 11 last season, Wong became the first Cardinals second baseman since Frankie Frisch (1927-28) to compile back-to-back seasons with 10 or more home runs. Wong ranked third among NL second basemen in homers last season and fourth in RBIs (61), while leading all second basemen with 312 putouts.

Wong led the Cardinals with 25 two-out RBIs last season and hit five of his 11 home runs with two outs. He also led the team in hit by pitch (15) and finished second in stolen bases (15).

Obama says ‘Play ball!’

Posting “Play ball!” on his Twitter account, President Barack Obama announced that he will attend a game between the Tampa Bay Rays and the Cuban national team on March 22 in Havana.

The White House said in a statement, “Americans and Cubans share a love of baseball, and this is yet another powerful reminder of the kinship between our peoples as well as the progress we can achieve when we leverage those natural ties.”

The game will be the first in Cuba involving a major league team since a visit by the Baltimore Orioles in 1999.

Mariners sign Navarro

The Seattle Mariners signed infielder Efrén Navarro to a minor league contract Wednesday.

Navarro, 29, has joined the team’s spring training camp in Peoria, Arizona.

Navarro was designated for assignment by the Baltimore Orioles on Feb. 25. He refused an outright assignment to the minors on Sunday, choosing to become a free agent prior to signing with Seattle.

The Los Angeles Angels traded Navarro to Baltimore on Jan. 26.

Navarro split last season between the Angels and Triple-A Salt Lake. In 54 major league games with the Angels, he batted .253 with five RBIs while appearing defensively at first base, left field and right field. Navarro hit .329 with two home runs in 72 games in Triple-A.

Navarro has appeared in

Mayo

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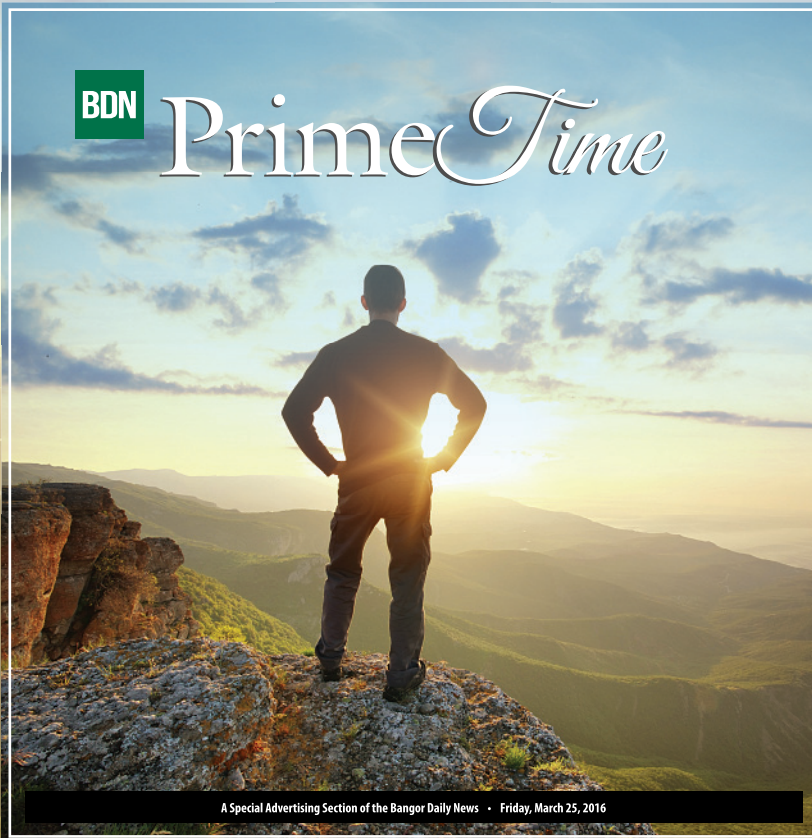
He was named the conference’s freshman of the week nine times during the season, which was the second

highest in the history of the award.

The Colonels finished with a 15-16 overall record and a 6-10 mark in the Ohio Valley Conference, finishing ninth and just missing the eight-team league playoffs that began Wednesday in Nashville, Tennessee.

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UMaine claims curling title

BELFAST — The University of Maine beat Bowdoin College to capture the sixth Maine College Curling Championship at the Belfast Curling Club on Saturday.

Members of the UMaine team were Katie Stone, lead position; Alex Becker, vice; Greg Kritzman, skip; and Katie Perry, second.

While UMaine claimed the state title, it will be the Bowdoin College team of Brunswick that will be mov-

ing on to the United States Curling Association’s college national championship March 11-13 in Chaska, Minnesota.

Bowdoin qualified by gaining points throughout the season, such as competing in bonspiels at several collegiate tournaments, at another in Belfast and one in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The team recorded two points for every game it won and one point for each loss.

Bowdoin is one of 16 teams to qualify for the national championship where Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute of Troy, New York, totaled the most qualifying points with 77, followed by the Rochester Institute of Technology and Bowdoin.

The teams will compete in four-team pools and then will be re-sorted for a single-elimination championship round based on pool-play standings.