

# More than a game: children with autism attend soccer camp

Seven-year-old Grayson Feith kicked the ball into the goal, and the crowd went wild. It could have been the first goal Grayson has ever made, but that's not the reason the crowd was cheering. Grayson didn't win the game with his kick either.

Grayson has autism and doesn't get many opportunities to participate in soccer camps. The crowd was cheering because, this day, Grayson was able to participate in a soccer camp. And, during the camp, he had a chance to score a goal, and he nailed it.

The Children Not Invited to Birthday Parties or Play Dates:

"We have the children who are not invited to birthday parties or play dates," Grayson's mother, Kathryn, said. "They learn social skills in ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis) therapy, but have no chance to practice them."

In ABA therapy, a child learns skills (social skills, communication skills, and others) by breaking the skills into small tasks. The child's ABA therapist rewards the child when he or she successfully completes a step.

Grayson was among 12 children from Project Hope in Greenwood and Bridging the Gap in Greenville who made their way to PC for a one-day soccer camp on April 29. They had a chance to practice social skills and learn the basics of the sport from members of PC's men's and women's soccer teams.

The crowd who cheered him and the other children on that day included the children themselves, their parents, ABA therapists, and 12 members of PC's soccer teams.

More Than a Game: Not many of the children had ever kicked a soccer ball, let alone attend a camp at a Division I school. Kathryn's son Grayson and PC history professor Dr. Stefan Wiecki's son are both members of the same Cub Scout pack in Greenwood. After one of the meetings, Kathryn mentioned that Grayson wanted to try soccer, but most soccer clubs seemed to be too competitive and team-oriented.

"At some point, when talking with Stefan, I realized that PC had student-athletes and a service-oriented cul-

ture," Kathryn said. "So I mentioned the idea of a soccer camp for children with autism to him."

Wiecki was on board from the start. He passed the idea along to Samantha Fink, who is one of his advisees and #21 on the women's soccer team.

"Sam was right away very supportive of the idea," Wiecki said.

After talking with her teammates and players on the men's soccer team, Fink found more than enough volunteers to make the camp a reality. Kathryn got in touch with teachers and parents of children at Project Hope and Bridging the Gap. According to Kathryn, both groups were excited about the camp.

"I have met many other families as we have dealt with trying to obtain services and find resources. Most would love their children to be involved in activities, but have trouble finding activities that are willing to accommodate the needs of their children," Kathryn said.

"Most no longer attend church because our children can't be quiet during the service or can't handle the music or the teachers don't want to deal with them."

Practicing Social Skills: But PC's soccer field provided the space the children needed for a less-structured time, according to Niki Porter, a case supervisor with Project Hope.

"The soccer camp was their therapy for the day," she said.

The children were free to play on the field and in the bleachers, and the teachers and parents were free from worrying about what might go wrong.

"Some of our families would never take their kid out to a soccer camp because they don't know what it would be like," Porter said. "This camp was a really cool way for them to practice doing things in a group and for their parents to see that having a soccer camp with a shadow wouldn't be so bad."

Each child's ABA therapist was there to help throughout the day. According to Porter, the children benefited most from listening to the players on the soccer teams.

"For them to hear instruction from



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players is nice because they spend all day with us," Porter said. "It's nice for the children to learn from other adults who are teaching them."

This social interaction helps the children understand that they can listen to others when they're away from the typical ABA setting. Kathryn attended an autism conference recently and heard young adults on the spectrum say over and over how they wished they had more opportunities for social interactions.

"They all said they figured out the academics, but still didn't know how to interact with people," Kathryn said. "I am very grateful and excited that PC has been not only willing to try but was excited and enthusiastic to welcome the children to campus."

Learning the Game Itself: The children practiced with others, and they learned soccer skills too. PC

soccer players taught the children soccer drills that they practice themselves. Fink led the children in the passing drill, one in which soccer players kicked balls back and forth with the soccer newcomers. The children loved lining up at midfield to practice.

The PC soccer players taught the children how to control the ball in the dribbling drill. Some children dribbled the ball from one end of Edens Field all 120 yards to the other end.

And in everyone's favorite, the children lined up and practiced kicking the ball into the goal. Each time a goal was scored, the children's proud parents and ABA therapists cheered so loudly you would have thought they won a championship that day.

"It was a joy to give these kids an opportunity to play a sport that's so close to my heart," Fink said.

# BCBS® receives customer recognition awards

For the sixth year in a row, the customer service advocates (CSAs) of BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina and BlueChoice® HealthPlan have received recognition for providing superior service to the companies' members. This acknowledgment of achievement comes from customer service tracking firm Service Quality Management Group (SQM).

The annual review identified 49 customer service advocates in BlueCross and BlueChoice call centers in Columbia, Greenville and Charleston whose job performance earned SQM World Class Certification or Most Improved Status. This means 80 percent of the calls handled were resolved leaving the customer "very satisfied" with the advocate and the overall experience.

"The CSAs are a critical point of entry into our company," said BlueCross President Scott Graves. "People call when they need help, are worried and sometimes not at their best. Our

CSAs must have product knowledge, but also be smart and compassionate people. I believe it is their commitment to ushering our members through their concerns that sets us apart."

In addition, BlueCross earned a Customer Experience Best Practice Award from SQM for its Performance Management System (PMS). The award recognizes the PMS, a coaching database, which tracks skills and continuous improvement in claims resolution.

Every year, SQM rates more than 500 leading North American call centers and conducts more than 1.5 million surveys of customers. The firm has been conducting studies of first-call resolution, employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction since 1996.

Headquartered in Columbia, BlueChoice HealthPlan of South Carolina (www.BlueChoiceSC.com) also is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.

# C of C holds spring 2019 commencement

The College of Charleston celebrated Spring 2019 Commencement with three ceremonies on May 10-11. The following local students were among more than 1,700 bachelor's degree and master's degree candidates who participated in the iconic annual event in the College's historic Cistern Yard:

Rebekah McKinney of Fountain Inn, graduated Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science in Exercise Science.

Desiree Belson of Laurens, graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication.

Students who graduated with Latin Honors completed a minimum of 62 quality hours of required degree coursework at

the College of Charleston and met the following cumulative GPA requirements:

•3.900 to 4.000 - Summa cum laude  
•3.750 to 3.899 - Magna cum laude

•3.500 to 3.749 - Cum laude

Located in the heart of historic Charleston, the College of Charleston is a nationally recognized public liberal arts and sciences university. Founded in 1770, the College is among the nation's top universities for quality education, student life and affordability. Its beautiful and historic campus, combined with contemporary facilities, cutting-edge programs and accessible faculty attracts students from across the U.S. and around the world.

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