

Jack the Soccer Player

Jack is a 13 year old year 7 Student. Jack has been playing soccer at his local club since he was 4 years old. Over the years as we have watched the kids grow we have also noticed the soccer field has increased in size, the kids skills have advanced and the game has become a lot faster, and yet despite Jack's disability he is still playing with his same aged peers. The local club has a strong focus on developing skills, having fun and being a team player. However, in 2012, Jack experienced quite the opposite. Even though Jack was playing with his cousin and friends this didn't safeguard him from the coach's very competitive "win at all costs approach".

The 2012 season of soccer was almost Jack's last due to the exclusionary attitude of the coach. Jack was played as an 'extra' for the team due to his disability, this meant the coach provided an explanation of why he was an extra each week to the opposing coach, he also missed the opportunity of subbing on and off and was not included in the half time coaching talks. Jack was also denied the opportunity to play goalie for various reasons, regardless of our advocacy. As the season went on, Jack's enthusiasm for the game diminished. He clearly felt rejected and not valued as a team player.

After struggling through 2012, we were left feeling deflated and saddened by this experience. However, we did not want this year to ruin Jack's future as a soccer player, so we picked ourselves back up, dusted ourselves off and went in search of a coach for the 2013 season that would hone in on Jack's strengths as a player, enable him to have fun and continue to develop his skills.

Since we had been part of the club for a number of years we befriended many families. We started talking with friends and key people in the club about the type of person we were looking for - someone that would have a positive approach with the kids; that would build on Jack's roles within the game; play Jack as a team member (not an extra) and develop his skills. Like most kids, Jack is also a competitive player and like most kids he revels in a win, so of course we were looking for a coach that enjoyed a win, but not at the expense of kids having fun and being included.

Our job was to clearly articulate what Jack could bring to the team. He has always been a good defender, when asked to mark someone; he would stick to the opposing player like

glue. He is really skilled at sideline throw ins and Jack has been noted for how he holds the team morale together.

We did find a fabulous coach for 2013 who was firm and loads of fun, who played Jack as a valued team member, who provided opportunities for Jack to hold roles throughout the game, such as defender, sideline throw ins and to pull on the gloves and play the elusive role of goalie.

What we have learned is that there are many people in the community that are willing and excited to include our son in typical, local sporting clubs. We as parents need to hold onto our vision for Jack to be a valued, contributing member of his community when we come across the people that don't share our views. Having Jack involved in his local club has provided opportunities for relationships to flourish and for Jack to become known and loved and certainly missed if he was not there. A true indicator of inclusion in action.