



# Racing Toward Greatness

*A Club's culture of inclusion  
leads to an inspiring  
success story*

*By John Collins*

Blake Leeper has always taken life head on. A bi-lateral, below-the-knee amputee since infancy, he was fitted with his first prostheses when he was 16 months old. Being a person with a disability is all Blake has ever known – but it's never held him back.

Today, this 20-year-old alumnus of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Kingsport in northeast Tennessee is an inspiring role model. A junior at the University of Tennessee, Blake is majoring in physics and plans to become a doctor. As if that isn't enough, he is also a member of the 2009 U.S. Paralympics Track & Field National Team. His aim: to

be a member of the 2012 Paralympics team, which will compete in London.

This scholar and athlete is a prime example of how an inclusive environment can be key in enabling anyone to realize their potential.

## ***What is Inclusion?***

Inclusion can mean different things to different people. For Boys & Girls Clubs, inclusion means involving all Club members, regardless of ability, in daily activities and accepting them for who they are. As Boys & Girls Clubs



of America's mission statement affirms, Clubs open their doors every day to "all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens."

Marvin Laster, director of diversity services for BGCA, believes the best way to support Club members with disabilities are by recognizing their inherent worth. "Inclusion is a philosophy, not a program," he says. "The focus should be on recognizing and celebrating the uniqueness and talents of each Club member."

## No Limits

Chuck Owens, director of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Kingsport, agrees. Owens, who has known Blake since he became a member, credits the young man's parents, Bill and Edith Leeper, with giving their son a solid foundation for his success. "He has great parents. They instilled in him that he didn't have any limitations."

An athlete from the get-go, Blake began playing baseball and basketball at age 5. He recalls how Anthony Richardson, his first Club baseball coach, welcomed him to the Club's 7-and-under baseball team.

"He gave me an opportunity just like the other guys," says Blake. "He treated me like everyone else. I didn't realize it at the time, but that was so important for me."

In Owens' estimation, children with disabilities "don't want preferential treatment. Treat them just like any other kid and they'll do great."

Unfortunately, not every person with a disability has the support system Blake did.

## A Sad Reality

In 2007, Cornell University's Employment and Disability Institute released the *Third Annual Disability Status Report*. The results were not encouraging.

- **Jobs** – Barely 38 percent of people with disabilities were employed, compared with about 80 percent of people without disabilities. There are 22.3 million people with disabilities of working age (21–64), representing 13 percent of the total working-age population.
- **Poverty** – Americans with disabilities are more than twice as likely to live in poverty: 25.4 percent of Americans with disabilities live in poverty compared to 9.5 percent of those without disabilities.

Clearly, such underemployment and excessive poverty hurts individuals with disabilities most. But ultimately, their underutilization also affects society and the country. Given the opportunity, people with disabilities have always made – and continue to make – vital, meaningful contributions to their communities.

Legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) makes it illegal to discriminate based on disability. While the ADA and other laws have broken some

barriers that once excluded individuals with disabilities, much work remains to be done. Boys & Girls Clubs can be at the forefront of these efforts. Clubs can develop a philosophy of inclusion that builds upon a sense of belonging, ensuring that every member is valued and respected. By setting a positive example, Boys & Girls Clubs can go a long way toward educating the public about the potential for greatness that exists within everyone.

## Going for Gold

Last June, Blake visited Oklahoma, where he competed in the 2009 UCO Endeavor Games for Athletes with Physical Disabilities. He won three gold medals – a precursor, he hopes, to bringing home the gold from London in 2012.

Whether it's studying physics, preparing to become a doctor or competing against world-class athletes, Blake says his prodigious drive to achieve comes from lessons he learned in Kingsport. "The Club taught us about good character, being a good person and being successful. They kept us busy every day. They taught us how to be productive in life."

Should Blake make it to London, he would likely compete in the 100-meter dash against South Africa's Oscar Pistorius, also a double-amputee and widely considered the fastest man with no legs. It's a tough assignment. But don't ever count Blake Leeper out.

*For more information about Embracing Inclusion, contact Marvin Laster, director of diversity services for BGCA, at [mlaster@bgca.org](mailto:mlaster@bgca.org).*

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## EMBRACING INCLUSION

Take advantage of BGCA's Embracing Inclusion initiative. Clubs can develop and implement their own inclusion philosophy by using resources such as a best practices guide, assessment tool and a comprehensive overview of the philosophy of inclusion.

- *Embracing Inclusion Best Practices Guide*: Best practices from five Clubs, including examples, ideas and resources to assist Clubs in developing and implementing an inclusion philosophy.
- *Guiding Practices for Inclusion*: This assessment tool allows Clubs to evaluate their current level of service to youth with disabilities. Includes recommended practices for Club programming and an action plan to identify and address areas that can be improved upon to more effectively serve members with disabilities.
- *It's About All of Us: A Guide for Developing Inclusive Club Programming*: This instructional guide can provide staff and volunteers with a better understanding of inclusion. Topics include how to partner with parents, appropriate staffing, what the Americans with Disabilities Act means for your Club and much more.