

Home-school students get sporting chance



Providence Athletic Club baseball players, from left, Matthew Lord, Jacob Cain, Clay Dickinson and Caleb Wilson cheer as a teammate gets an opponent out in the game against Heathwood Hall.

The youngsters playing for the Providence Panthers spend more time at home than most high school athletes, but they don't have a real home court or home field.

Now they finally have a chance to compete on the high school level through the year-old Providence Athletic Club.

Home-school students in the Midlands have had few chances to compete in athletics in the past. The S.C. High School League doesn't allow students to play on a high school team unless they attend the school. Legislative efforts to change those rules haven't gained traction.

That frustration sparked the formation of the Providence Athletic Club.

Jennifer Aurednik's son Matthew played on a Lexington County Soccer Club year-round team for several years. But when club soccer players hit the under-15 age group, there's only a fall season. Most of the kids that age play high school soccer in the spring, making it hard to have a spring club season. That left Matthew Aurednik and other high school-aged home school students without a soccer outlet in the spring.

"Without soccer, I had more free time," Jennifer Aurednik said, "so I sent out a letter to local home school organizations in March (2009), trying to see if there was any interest in forming a soccer team."

She got enough feedback to schedule an organizational meeting the next month.

"We just talked and wondered if this could be done," Aurednik said.

The next step was a trip to Sumter to talk with the organizers of Covenant Central Sports, one of the first home school teams in the state.

After that conversation, "we realized this can be done," Aurednik said. "We said 'Let's go ahead and do it,' and we took a step of faith."

The parents scheduled a practice on June 9 to gauge the interest. The turnout stunned them. Not only did 43 kids show up, but three parents had coaching experience. "We hoped to have enough for maybe a coed team," said Vince Williams.

A veteran coach with Columbia United FC, the largest soccer club in the Midlands, Williams also had a home-schooled son looking for a spring team. Williams agreed to coach the Panthers.

By the time word spread of the effort, Providence had enough players for varsity boys and girls teams and a coed junior varsity team.

Then parents of children interested in other sports contacted Aurednik, and Providence really took off. The first team to compete was cross-country last fall. Providence now has basketball, baseball, softball, track and golf teams.

"Each sport was added not because we were trying to expand PAC, but because someone caught the vision for it to be and was passionate about making it happen," Aurednik said. "We are open to any sport being added as long as there are families with a vision for it. People have recently contacted me pertaining to a football team. We will see what happens."

So many kids came out for the baseball team - which competes at the junior varsity level - that coach Jim Blevins had to cut players. He hopes to have varsity and junior varsity teams next year, providing more roster spots for the pent-up demand.

"I get e-mails from parents of 5-year-olds who say they appreciate that someone is stepping up and giving them something like this to look forward to in the future," Blevins said.

Parents are more than willing to pay \$250-\$300 to cover officiating fees, uniforms and insurance. They don't have the advantage of school activity buses, so parents have to transport their children to the games, which are mostly on the home fields or courts of high school teams.

Aurednik started calling high school soccer coaches in August to set up a spring schedule. Most were skeptical at first. But when told the state's public and private school athletic associations had given them the OK, enough coaches decided to give Providence a chance. The schedule is a mixture of games against private schools and small public schools.

A few "home" soccer games are played at the Richland County Recreation Commission's Garners Ferry Road Complex. Others are played at Columbia United's complex in Ballentine. The soccer teams practice at the Red Bank Complex in Lexington County.

The baseball team alternates practices between Hopkins and Friarsgate parks, but it's getting harder to find available fields as youth leagues begin practice, Blevins said.

The Panthers boys soccer team looked sharp in Navy blue and white uniforms on March 27 as it battled a German club team here on an exchange program. The Germans won 3-1, but the Panthers - a mix of veteran club players and some with little experience - held their own.

"We've lost more than we've won, but this season it's a win just being able to get out there on the field on the high school level," Aurednik said. "I figured there would be kids who wanted to play. It just took people stepping up and initiating it."

When Ashley Keown heard about Providence, she tried to talk her son Josh into playing. He balked at first because he had little soccer experience. He changed his mind when he realized playing would boost his grade in a home-school physical education course.

"He found out he was better than he thought he was," Ashley Keown said. "I wish I had taken a video of him when he tried out. His development has been incredible."

Dwayne Creech's two daughters, Hannah and Sarah, travel from Monetta to practice and play with the girls varsity soccer team as much for the camaraderie as the competition.

"There's a common bond from the home-schoolers not being able to participate at the school level," Creech said. "With this team, even without a school building, we've got school spirit."

Many of the parents wear Providence Panthers sweatshirts and slap PAC magnets on their vehicles. Soccer players attend the basketball team games, and vice versa. The club recently staged the first meeting of its new Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter.

"It's really meeting a need in the community," Aurednik said. "The games contribute to the high school experience, the feel of coming together to support one team. There's a sense of belonging to something."

Reach Holleman at (803) 771-8366.