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SUBHEADLINE: With love and support \_ and lots of sports \_ children  
with  
Down's syndrome are leading happy and fulfilled lives

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Playing sport is often like confronting a punching-ball. You hit it  
and it  
hits you back. You may not feel like you're winning, but you are.  
You're  
gaining strength and balance and, by extension, self-confidence,  
discipline,  
concentration, even the value of mutual respect.

The benefits of sport and physical activity are widely recognised.  
Sport  
makes you trim and puts you in good shape. Above all, as you pit  
yourself  
against nature, other people or yourself, you get perspective on  
yourself  
and your body.

If everyone benefits from sport, it's not surprising that people with  
special needs do too.

For example, people with learning difficulties and developmental  
disorders  
such as Down's syndrome \_ one of the three major causes of mental  
retardation along with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and Fragile X  
syndrome\_ find  
sport a great way to improve motor skills as well as physical  
fitness.

Additional gains that come with consistent physical exercise include  
greater  
self-confidence, a more positive self-image, self-discipline and  
friendship.  
Sport also helps youngsters experience the joy of community and  
family  
support.

Recognition of these benefits resulted in the setting up in 1968 of  
the  
Special Olympics Movement, which has benefited millions of children  
and  
adults around the world with its year-round programmes of sports  
training  
and athletic competitions.

Founded in the US by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who had been running day  
camps  
for people with mental retardation and had become convinced of her  
clients'  
sporting skills, the movement grew rapidly.

Some 150 countries now take part and new participants are being added all the time, according to the movement's Web site.

Studies conducted in the 1980s suggest that around 3 percent of the world population have mental retardation, or an Intellectual Quotient level (IQ) below 80. That means some 160 million people with mental retardation around the world \_ roughly four times the number of those visually impaired.

Thailand is no exception to the 3 percent average and this country has taken part in the Special Olympics International programme since 1987.

It's a valiant effort \_ the Thai committee based on Soi Pipat on Silom Road has only two permanent staff members to oversee a membership of nearly 8,000 people from 54 provinces. Behind the staffers, a vast army of volunteers, including 410 teachers and 680 other individuals, also help out.

Like other countries, the Special Olympics Thailand runs many activities \_ sports camps four times a year, athletic competitions four to five times a year and other competitions emphasizing motor skills and regular training for coaches. There's also a yearly fund-raising event.

Thai participants take part in the Regional Special Olympics every two years and the world-scale International Special Olympics Games every four years.

The busy schedule of positive activities is not, of course, a total solution, and there's a long way to go before people with mental retardation in this country emerge from the shadows.

For instance, though the Special Olympics movement is supposed to be open to persons aged four to 80, the Thai branch only deals with children and teenagers.

``Generally we don't have adults enrolling in our programme in Thailand. We don't know where they go, once they've become adults, and nobody seems to care,'' said a frustrated Rachaniwan Bulakul, the energetic Special Olympics of Thailand's national director.

``It's a real problem, because we are trying here to provide fun and travel, to give people opportunities. But what's the use if they go on to just stay secluded at home when they're adults, for the rest of their lives?''

Indeed, most mentally disabled persons are still confined at home for most of their lives. It's common for parents to feel too embarrassed to take them out, which just perpetuates society's prejudice.

Given this grim scenario, it was heartening to watch the devotion, patience and open-heartedness of parents and teachers at a recent get-together at Barracuda Sports Club on Silom Road.

A small group of children from the Rachanukoon School for the mentally disabled in Din Daeng district gathered with parents and teachers in order to swim, share experiences, and meet the press.

Rachaniwan explained why sport was so important for get-togethers such as this. ``Sport is a way for them to channel their energy. Having a goal and an aim makes so many things easier. All these kids are multiple athletes. The more they develop their sporting skills, the easier it is for them to learn other new things.''

In a turquoise swimming pool bathed in sunlight, children aged seven to 17 paddled cheerfully and complied promptly with their coach's instructions.

It was just a little scene, but it signified a lot, because it showed how putting in time and effort can reap wonderful rewards.

The youngsters calmly followed instructions from their dedicated coach, Khrongkhan Tunyasita, showing they'd learned patience and discipline, two things which parents know can come hard to children with Down's syndrome.

``It is obvious that the methods of teaching used here, plus the enormous amount of patience by teachers, work well. You see children progressing without injury or difficulty,' ' said Rachaniwan.

``Ultimately, we're trying to develop the children's learning abilities. Sport is a bridge to the overall person. It's not about creating athletes in the strict sense.''

There was no shortage of enthusiasm around.

``Although the youngsters are a little slower than average kids in learning,

they can become very talented, especially in sports,' beamed Ampha Yawisuth, a volunteer trainer from Chiang Mai province.

Duangchan Soisut, a volunteer trainer for mentally retarded children in Khon Kaen province, said: ``Mentally retarded children should take part in many different activities. It's the best way for them to develop, socially, physically, compartmentally and emotionally.

``We've seen remarkable changes \_ children's moods are better, they're more focused, they develop patience as well as discipline and independence. Sport can also help with tackling hormonal troubles and can help reduce the sexual impulses that some may experience when they reach adulthood,' she added.

But even more than sport, the vital ingredient for the children's optimum development is that their parents are accepting of them and open-minded.

Beaming Klamornthip Pancharoen, proud mother of eight-year old Bee (Ronarit), is an inspiring example in this regard \_ she never misses a chance to expose the boy to new experiences.

``My husband and I had been trying to have a child for five years \_ we'd tried all kinds of doctors and prayed to all kinds of gods. In the end, Bee must have been so keen to answer our call that he skipped the final stage of development!'' laughed Klamornthip.

She manages to pursue a full-time career in the planning division of the Board of Investment (BOI), on top of looking after her demanding young child. ``The quality of the relationship and the quality of the time we spend together is more important than just the amount of hours,' she says.

``Parental attitude has so much to do with the child's development. If parents feel embarrassed \_ or ashamed as some of them do\_ about their kid, there is no way the child will improve. But if we take them along with us and teach them how to behave in society, they will be fine.''

The young mother practises what she preaches \_ during school vacations, Bee accompanies his mother to work, and also goes with her upcountry.

``One ought to constantly open new horizons for them,' says Klamornthip.

Bee is a sports fan too.

``I love golf, tennis, football, swimming. I am also very good at ping-pong,' ' explains the cheerful boy, as his doting mom looks on, one eyebrow raised quizzically. ``I love watching TV too, especially the Discovery Channel, and playing computer games and listening to music,' ' Bee continues playfully.

It wasn't always this blissful for the family, of course. Distressful times are still vivid in the memories of Klamornthip and her husband. There was getting over the initial shock when they found out their newborn had the disorder, then there were worries over the baby's basic health. For three years, Bee took medicine every day for various ailments common to Down's syndrome children, such as congenital heart disease and intestinal abnormalities.

``Actually Bee just started to eat solid food recently. Until age seven, he just drank milk,' ' said his mother.

Like other kids with Down's syndrome, Bee took twice the average time to master a new skill. He sat up by himself at age one and started to walk at just three-and-a-half years of age.

And what of it? Bee is his mum and dad's little darling for now and the rest of his life. Who knows \_ maybe he'll be among the 36 Special Olympics athletes to represent Thailand at the upcoming World Summer Games in 2003 in Ireland. The selection board will choose candidates next year.

Bee has already self-assessed himself. He's a brilliant ping pong player \_ now he just needs the committee to agree.

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The Special Olympics Thailand can be supported financially by sending donations to the Special Olympics Thailand, Thai Farmers Bank \_ Ekamai branch account number 059-2-36446-8; or to the Foundation for the Mentally Retarded of Thailand (Special Olympics), at Thai Farmers Bank \_ Asoke Din Daeng branch, account number 049-2-30733-5.