

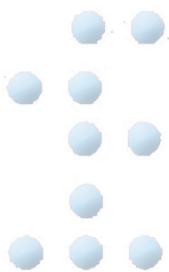


# Giving **Blind** and **Visually Impaired People**

## Opportunities to Become Fit

By David Block

*Sometimes a silver lining has a dark cloud. One example was the passage of Public Law 94-142 where many children with disabilities were transferred to public schools. Public Law 94-142: Education of Handicapped Children Act, now known, as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which Congress passed in 1975, required local school districts "to provide a free and appropriate public education, to students regardless of their disabilities."*

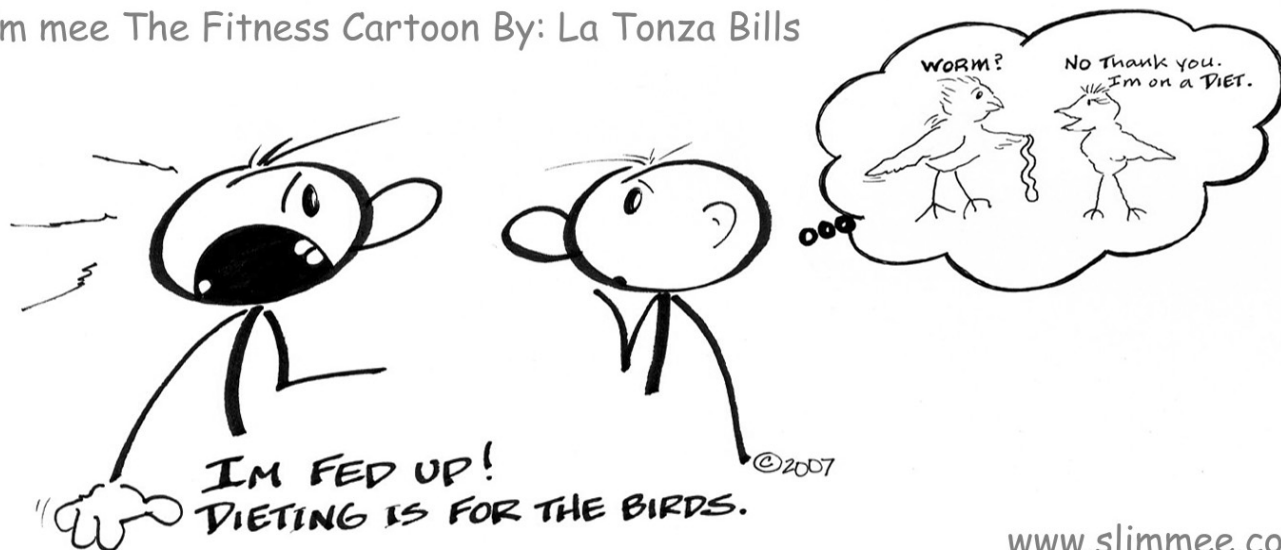


The late Dr. Mae Davidow, who was a totally blind math teacher at Overbrook School for the Blind in Philadelphia, opposed the law. She accurately predicted that many blind students, transferring to public schools would be excluded from gym class, thus causing them to get out of shape. This concern compelled her to form the Philadelphia Blind Sports Club in 1974 (one year

before Public Law 94-142 became official), to give visually challenged children in public and private schools opportunities to experience the joy of becoming physically fit.

With the help of her fully sighted friend Sandy White, who has been the program's sports development director since 1988, she expanded the organization to

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reach out to blind and visually impaired people of all ages throughout Pennsylvania. (The organization changed its name to the Pennsylvania Association of Blind Athletes [PABA] in the '80s, but last summer its board of directors changed the name to the Blind Sports Organization [BSO].) "I promised Mae on her deathbed (June, 1989) that I would keep her organization alive," said White.

To this day, Sandy White holds sports clinics for blind and visually impaired children. "When I begin each session," said White, "I ask a series of questions and I usually get the same results. One of the twelve children in his clinic had never played any type of a ball game. There were two or three kids who never did a push up or sit up. These things might not seem very important, but it's an indication that these kids are not growing one hundred percent normally. Our organization has done surveys and we discovered that most blind people are not members of their YMCAs. They're not doing any physical activities."

Over the years, BSO has given their members opportunities to play sports such as the international Paralympic game of goalball, beep baseball, soccer for the blind, track and judo. "In the past year, our judo program has made tremendous improvements," said White. "Prior to that, we only had judo clinics three times a year, because the coach running the clinic was too busy to get more involved. He helped us recruit Marc Vink (a 5th degree black belt), who was willing to put in the time. Marc is incredibly dedicated to making our judo program grow."

Vink has recruited other judo coaches. Saturday mornings at Overbrook School for the Blind, Vink and fellow judo coach Paul Latimore run judo programs for youths, beginners and advanced students. Their Friday night sessions focus on preparing experienced BSO judo athletes to compete in tournaments.

Vink on coaching BSO athletes: "I get more enjoyment out of teaching blind and visually impaired people judo than I ever had in my whole life teaching other people. I taught elite athletes, I managed elite judo teams, but I get more pleasure working with the visually impaired, I see the joy on their faces. They get an incredible amount of joy out of it. It could be because of their limited participation in sports. It's new and exciting for them. Many fully sighted people take opportunities (to take part in sports) for granted."

Vink has received a lot of feedback, not just from the athletes, but also from their families. One example is 14-year-old Jeffrey Boudwin of Drexel Hill whose self-confidence improved. Jeffrey, who is totally blind, discovered that he enjoyed judo while attending a BSO clinic. "I thought the instructors were great in explaining the moves," said Jeffrey. He wanted to do judo year round, but living too far away from any judo facility made that impossible. Luckily, BSO solved that problem. "Doing judo is helping Jeffrey feel good about himself," said his father, Jack Boudwin. Both his father and Coach Vink observed that Jeffrey's conditioning has improved

since he first walked onto a judo mat nine months ago. "I remember that Jeffrey was a lot more timid," said Vink.

Vink credits a number of reasons for the BSO judo program's success. "We're very positive with the students," said Vink. "We don't say, 'you can't do it,' 'your technique is awful' - no disparaging comments. If someone's technique is off base, we'd say, 'try doing it this way now.' Our program is designed to make everyone feel safe. We've had no injuries."

One of the BSO judo program's biggest benefactors, Lou Moyerman runs the Liberty Bell Judo Club in Philadelphia. Moyerman, who was also team leader for the 2000 U.S. Olympic Judo Team, said that he found it enlightening to coach a totally blind athlete. "You don't need your eyes for judo," said Moyerman. He said the key difference in coaching a blind athlete was more hands on training and verbal communication. His students with perfect vision merely learned by watching.

To learn more about BSO, log onto [www.pablindsports.org](http://www.pablindsports.org) or call 1-800-596-5146 (access code - 33).



David Block is a freelance journalist and documentary producer based in Ardmore, PA. Two of his documentaries, "Goalball: A Sport for Good Listeners" (1992) and "Portraits of Possibility" (1996) focus on blind and visually impaired athletes. To learn more about David Block contact him at [david@phillyfitmagazine.com](mailto:david@phillyfitmagazine.com).

An advertisement for 'PHILLYFIT Bash!' featuring a woman with long dark hair and large earrings, holding a red lollipop. The background is red. The text 'Are YOU coming to the PHILLYFIT Bash!' is prominently displayed in yellow and white. Below it, 'PHILLYFITMAGAZINE.COM' is written in white, and 'see page 4 for details' is at the bottom in white.