



2023

## Impact Report

*Changing the lives of youth & veterans with physical disabilities through the power of adaptive sports & recreation*

# BlazeSports

## **BlazeSports America Friends, Volunteers, and Supporters –**

As 2023 comes to a close, we want to take a moment to express our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who supported BlazeSports this year. Your unwavering commitment to ensuring that BlazeSports athletes have access to high-quality programs allows us to reflect on the past year with pride. To our BlazeSports athletes, you are the inspiration for all that we do, and we are continually moved by your stories and achievements.

This past year, BlazeSports has celebrated numerous successes and made a significant impact on the lives of the individuals we serve. Our youth programs have continued to grow, with many now serving record numbers of participants. Our basketball, track & field, and swimming youth teams all excelled at national championships, showcasing their talent and hard work culminating in an SEC Championship for our prep team and a top 5 ranking nationally. Additionally, our veteran programs have expanded to include 10 weekly sessions, providing support to Veterans with physical disabilities as well as those dealing with PTSD.

This year, we hosted a number of our Blaze Day in the Schools initiative, bringing adaptive sports to schools across Georgia. This program not only showcases our amazing athletes but also educates and advocates for the transformative power of adaptive sports. We also expanded our BlazeTOTS program to include toddler adaptive dance and parent-toddler swim classes to serve those with disabilities at the youngest ages.

In addition to our established events, we hosted our 2nd wheelchair tennis tournament in partnership with ALTA and USTA Southern. We also continued the momentum of our annual events, hosting the third annual Peachtree Paragames, the seventh annual Big Peach Slam Jam, and the fourth annual 5k Run, Roll, and Row. Our military camps, including Camp Phoenix, and the Triumph of the Human Spirit Awards honored six extraordinary individuals who embody the resilience of the human spirit.

What an incredible year! Please read more about our remarkable athletes and program achievements in this report. Thank you to all our athletes, family members, staff, and volunteers for your continued inspiration. Looking ahead, 2024 will mark a significant milestone as we celebrate the 28th anniversary of BlazeSports and the 1996 Paralympics. We are excited to honor our legacy and the impact we've made in the world of adaptive sports. We look forward to an exciting future ahead.

Best Wishes,



**Dawn Churi**  
Executive Director



**Andy McNeil**  
Board Chair

# Mission

To change the lives of children, youth, and veterans with physical disabilities through adaptive sports, physical activity, and recreation.

# Vision

Our vision is for every individual with a physical disability to have access and opportunities to experience the joys and benefits of sports and physical activity in all aspects of life.

## BlazeSports Board of Directors 2023

### Chairman

Andrew McNeil, Esq.

Duane Morrow

Pam Sawyer

John Smith

Mechelle Brown

Lisa Simmons

Chris Hood

Helen Dowdell

Katherine Creek (August, 2023)

## BlazeSports Parent **Advisory** Board 2023

Kelli Munkel (Chair)

Susan Fraser

Don Grimsley

Mechelle Brown

# 2023 Events

---



## **Big Peach Slam Jam Wheelchair Basketball Tournament** *February 4 & 5th, 2023*

The 2023 BlazeSports Big Peach Slam Jam, presented by the Atlanta Hawks, was the largest tournament of its kind in the Southeast. Sanctioned by the NWBA, the 7th Annual Big Peach Slam Jam welcomed teams from across the U.S. in both Varsity and Prep divisions. Congratulations to all the teams and athletes who showcased incredible sportsmanship and skill on the court. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the 100+ volunteers and our generous sponsors and partners whose support made this event a remarkable success.



## **Peachtree Paragames** *June 16th & 17th, 2023*

A multi-sport competitive event designed for athletes ranging from developmental to elite Paralympic levels, the Paragames offered participants a variety of sports, including archery, track and field, and swimming. The event was a resounding success, showcasing the talents and determination of adaptive athletes. We look forward to making the Paragames an annual summer tradition, celebrating the spirit of competition and community.



## **Camp Phoenix** *June 4th - 9th, 2023*

BlazeSports Camp Phoenix, held at Camp Twin Lakes Rutledge West in Rutledge, GA, offers kids and teens with physical disabilities the opportunity to engage in a wide range of adaptive sports and recreational activities. Participants not only develop new skills but also build leadership and self-advocacy abilities, foster greater independence, and create lasting friendships. This experience aims to inspire and uplift young athletes as they discover their potential and embrace the joy of sports.



## **Third Annual Run, Row, & Roll 5K** *August 6th, 2023*

The Third Annual Run, Row, & Roll 5K, located in Lilburn, Georgia, is an event for participants to run, row, roll, swim, cycle, or crawl. The 5K included an adaptive division, rowing division, and age group divisions, as well as a fun run.

# Athlete Accomplishments

## Senior Spotlight 2023

We are proud to present a class of impressive BlazeSports athletes graduating this year, who are already making an impact in the world around them as future alumni. These seniors have been a huge asset to BlazeSports, and we thank them for all they have done for our organization.



### Zach Armas

**Auburn University,  
Wheelchair Basketball**

His favorite Blaze memory was winning third place at nationals after the team faced some challenges, stating, "I think those last few games made the team closer to one another."



### Sam Fraser

**University of Arizona,  
Wheelchair Basketball**

One of Sam's favorite memories at Blaze is playing in the 2021 Junior National Championship with her teammates.



### Maggie Arnold

**Grand Canyon University**

Maggie's favorite memory with Blaze is warming up with her team and Coach Higgins. She actively participates in our BlazeSports adaptive track and field program and her school's running club.



### Mike Heininger

**PennWest University,  
Wheelchair Basketball**

Mike, through BlazeSports, has developed strong communication skills and gained the confidence to step out of his comfort zone.



### Tyler Brown

**Dillard University**

Ty, an active para-swimmer, credits BlazeSports for helping her embrace her disability. She shares that Blaze taught her to connect with peers and develop essential life skills as she prepares for college.



### Jude Hiley

**Auburn University, Wheelchair Basketball & Tennis**

One of Jude's favorite memories at BlazeSports is winning the 2022 Big Peach Slam Jam.



### Khalli Crooke

One of his proudest achievements is earning third place at the NWBA Junior Nationals. He has greatly valued the opportunity BlazeSports has provided him to train and compete alongside fellow athletes and coaches in a sport he is passionate about.



### Jon Trawick

**University of Arizona,  
Swimming & Wheelchair Basketball**

Jon's favorite Blaze memory was attending Nationals and delivering a speech at the 2023 Triumph of the Human Spirit Awards.

# Training & Education

*Building Capacity in Adaptive Sport and Physical Activity Nationwide*



## **The BlazeSports America Certified Adaptive Recreation and Sports Specialist™**

In 2023, BlazeSports hosted the 2023 National Parasport Conference in Peachtree Corners, GA, from October 9th to 12th. With attendees joining both virtually and in person, we brought together industry leaders in parasport from across the country. This year's theme, "**Sport Empowerment**," reflected our dedication to growing and improving the parasport community for both providers and athletes alike.

This conference consists of intensive courses designed to help participants obtain our nationally recognized certifications in adaptive sports. The certifications offered include CASC (Certified Adaptive Sport Coach) and CASI (Certified Adaptive Swim Instructor). This event exemplifies our commitment to growing and enhancing the parasport community for both providers and athletes.

## **BlazeTOTS**

BlazeTOTS, a groundbreaking initiative by BlazeSports, is dedicated to transforming the lives of preschoolers with disabilities by fostering healthy, active lifestyles. In 2023, we reached remarkable milestones that underscore our commitment to this vital mission.

This year, BlazeTOTS significantly expanded its outreach, introducing the launching of 8 new flagship programs, the expansion of certified partners to over 20, and tailoring programs to serve the youngest youth population with disabilities by launching our adaptive dance and parent-toddler swim classes and by training both early childhood education centers and parents in this critical work. In 2023, our BlazeTOTS program served over 500 toddlers with disabilities.

BlazeTOTS is more than just a program; it's a movement that champions inclusivity, health, and the boundless potential of every young child.



# Training & Education

## BlazeTOTS Impact Summary

- **27 Early Childcare Centers** are utilizing our adaptive curriculum & resources
- Delivered **in-person physical activity programs at 8 early childcare centers** in metro Atlanta
- BlazeTOTS is **servicing 15 counties** across Georgia
- Currently **serve 335 children** in low-income and rural areas
- Partnered with 15 Head Start Centers serving **over 900 children in poverty**
- **Trained 25 teachers and over 70 parents** on inclusive physical activity and healthy living
- Offered six free community adaptive sports programs to toddlers with disabilities



Sport with a purpose. Building Leadership, Employment Readiness, Self-Advocacy and Positive Development of Youth with Physical Disabilities. Youth LEAD is an initiative of BlazeSports designed to help prepare young people with physical disabilities for adulthood through the transformative power of sport. The BlazeSports Youth LEAD program supports youth by actively involving them in activities that not only teach the skills needed for a particular career but also provide the work readiness skills essential for finding and maintaining employment.

As part of our new board structure, we have introduced an athlete council for both youth and veteran athletes. This council serves as a sounding board for BlazeSports planning and provides leadership opportunities, giving our athletes a voice in shaping the future of our programs.

### Youth LEAD Webinars:

- Navigating Disability Services – December 14th, 2023
- Skills for the Future – March 22nd, 2023

# Youth & Veteran Programs

*BlazeSports uses sport as a vehicle for positive development, improved health, and success on and off the field of play.*

## Member growth

### *Increase in number of participants in BSA programs*

In 2023, we welcomed 10 new youth athletes and 166 new veteran athletes, marking significant growth in our programs. We also saw increased attendance in our wheelchair tennis program for youth. Additionally, we introduced a new air rifle program for veterans, which was fully attended, further expanding our offerings and engagement.

## Youth Programs Offered Year-Round

- Wheelchair Basketball – Prep, Varsity Red, and Varsity White Teams
- Track & Field
- Swimming – Learn to Swim and Learn to Train
- Big Peach Slam Jam Wheelchair Basketball Tournament
- Wheelchair Tennis

## Youth Sport Clinics

- Tennis Clinics
- Wheelchair Basketball Day Camp (July 22nd)
- Female Climbing Clinic (August 16th)
- Track Training with Two Paralympians (March 2nd)
- Kayak Clinic (August 3rd)

## Veteran Programs Offered Year-Round

- Archery
- Bowling
- CrossFit
- Cycling
- Rowing
- Yoga
- Water Aerobics
- Tennis
- Air Rifle
- Pickleball and Cornhole





## Blazesports America Hosts The Largest Big Peach Slam Jam

BlazeSports America made history by hosting the largest Big Peach Slam Jam to date, a groundbreaking wheelchair basketball tournament, and the biggest of its kind outside of nationals. Our Jr. Hawks White team celebrated a remarkable victory by winning the Junior National Invitation Tournament (JNIT). In an exciting development, the tournament expanded to include a women's division for the first time, enhancing opportunities for female athletes and promoting inclusivity within the adaptive sports community. The success of this tournament underscores BlazeSports' commitment to empowering athletes of all abilities and advancing the future of wheelchair basketball.

# Thank You

To all our generous partners, funders, sponsors, and individual donors who supported BlazeSports programs and services throughout 2023, we are truly grateful!

Thank you **to our sponsors:**



# 2023 Financial Summary

Figures based on BlazeSports FY2023 Audited Financial Statements, Mersereau, Lazenby & Rockas LLC.

## REVENUE AND OTHER SUPPORT

	WITHOUT DONOR RESTRICTIONS	WITH DONOR RESTRICTIONS	TOTAL
Contributions	\$96,505	\$0	\$96,505
Foundation Grants and Sponsors	\$178,325	\$34,500	\$212,825
Fees and other Revenue	\$72,878	\$0	\$72,878
State Grants	\$522,818	\$0	\$522,818
Government Grants	\$0	\$202,051	\$202,051
License Tags	\$17,406	\$0	\$17,406
Investment Income	\$10,736	\$0	\$10,736
Pandemic-related Income	\$35,007	\$0	\$35,007
Net Assets Released from Restriction - Satisfaction of Program Restrictions	\$232,393	(\$232,393)	--
<b>Total Revenue and Other Support</b>	<b>\$1,156,850</b>	<b>\$4,158</b>	<b>\$1,161,008</b>

## EXPENSES

	WITHOUT DONOR RESTRICTIONS	WITH DONOR RESTRICTIONS	TOTAL
Program Services	\$757,664	\$0	\$757,664
Management and General	\$162,923	\$0	\$162,923
Fundraising	\$57,016	\$0	\$57,016
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$977,603</b>	<b>\$0</b>	<b>\$977,603</b>

	WITHOUT DONOR RESTRICTIONS	WITH DONOR RESTRICTIONS	TOTAL
Change in Net Assets	\$179,247	\$4,158	\$183,405
Net Assets, beginning of year	\$230,074	\$11,656	\$241,730
Net Assets, end of year	\$409,321	\$15,814	\$425,135



**BlazeSports America**

3000 Business Park Drive, Suite A  
Norcross, GA 30071

📞 404-270-2000

✉️ [info@blazesports.org](mailto:info@blazesports.org)

BlazeSports America is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and the legacy organization of the 1996 Atlanta Paralympic Games. We offer adaptive sport programs and services that support good health, build leadership skills, foster independence and inclusion and reduce social isolation. Our training and education builds the capacity of current and future leaders in the field. BlazeSports is the two-time recipient of the US Olympic and Paralympics Rings of Gold (2016 and 2017), a member of the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee Organizational Council, and the USA Member of Cerebral Palsy International Sport and Recreation Association.

# 2023 Events

---



## Veteran Family

August 11th - 13th, 2023

BlazeSports veterans and their families joined us for a Family Fun Day at Camp Twin Lakes, Fort Yargo State Park. Families were grouped together, and fun activities for all ages were provided, including rock climbing, archery, yoga, zip-lining, horseback riding, canoeing, fishing, and much more.



## National ParaSport Conference

October 9th - 12th, 2023

Hosted by BlazeSports, the theme for the event was “**Sport Empowerment**” which reflects how we can continue to grow and improve the ParaSport community for providers and athletes. The conference offers CEUS and professional certifications.



## Triumph of the Human Spirit

October 18th, 2023

The Triumph of the Human Spirit Awards honors those who have made a significant impact through adaptive sports and recreation. Those who inspire, motivate, and truly epitomize the Triumph of the Human Spirit.

### Award Winners:

Veteran Athlete of the Year: **Anthony Jewell**

Youth Athlete of the Year: **Ben Vondrak**

Coach of the Year: **Mara Cunningham**

Team of the Year: **Lady Ballers**

Volunteer of the Year: **Alex Bradley**

Outstanding Young Alumni: **Martinez Johnson**