

CELEBRATING



UNIFIED SPORTS FLAG FOOTBALL

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December 22, 2025

The culminating events of the Connecticut high school football season took place on December 13, with 12 teams vying for CIAC Football State Championships. It was the biggest day on the high school football calendar in Connecticut. Roughly a month earlier another big day in Connecticut high school football took place with far less fanfare, but with no less import for the kids taking part. For those kids, and for the many who may follow in their footsteps, it was a day worthy of championship excitement.

In early November, the Derby High School Unified Sports program hosted teams from three different schools for a full day of Unified flag football competition. Four high schools sponsoring flag football out of nearly 200 schools in the state is a fraction, but those who took part see a path where flag football could become a fixture of high school Unified programs.

"I think we are going to really see it take off and grow quickly over the next few years," said Enfield High School Unified coach Armando Ramos. "It has been a great Unified activity at our school and having an event where teams could come together showed what it can look like in the future."

There is no argument that football is the dominant sport in American culture, which helps explain the explosion and popularity of flag football over the past decade. The sport has become wildly popular throughout the country, with the CIAC hosting its first-ever girls flag football championship event last June. It is also slated to make its Olympics debut in the summer of 2028, making it easy to understand why a growing number of schools are bringing flag football to the Unified Sports ranks.

Not every sport is for every Unified program. But given the strength and size of many programs across the state new opportunities for participation and expansion often catch on quickly. Demonstrating its reputation as a model state for Unified participation, there are resources available whether in the form of equipment or specific coaching education opportunities to help launch new initiatives. If schools express an interest in jumping into the Unified flag football experience, the CIAC Unified Sports staff is there to spot them.

"Where there is a will there is a way," CIAC Unified Sports Executive Director John Niski explained. "We are here to help schools get programs off the ground whether it is a new activity or starting an entirely new program. We are ready to support schools any way we can."

That support aided Derby Unified coach Carlin Ali and Director of Athletics Jen Moffat to begin integrating flag football as a Unified offering.

For Ramos a Unified flag football event was a sight for sore eyes. Enfield began taking part in flag football in 2017 primarily to give Simsbury High School – which Ramos believes was the first Connecticut school to offer the sport – a team to play. Since then, flag football has flourished at Enfield, so the prospect of seeing the sport expand to other districts is highly exciting.

"To have the chance to join with other Connecticut schools with flag football was so fun and welcome," he noted. "Our kids were thrilled to be taking part in this with other kids in Connecticut and the day was really exceptional."

At first blush, the physicality, complexity, and speed of football – even flag football – might seem like a high barrier for entry with Unified Sports. The individuals at Derby and Enfield understand that might prove intimidating and create a challenge for some schools, but they stress that like all Unified sports offerings there are ways to make it accessible and highly enjoyable for the athletes.

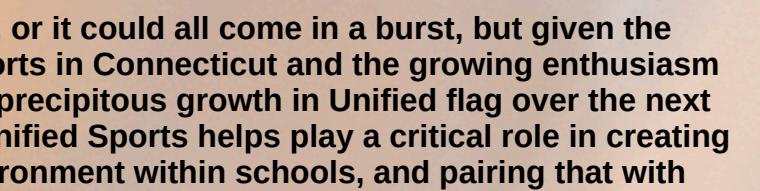
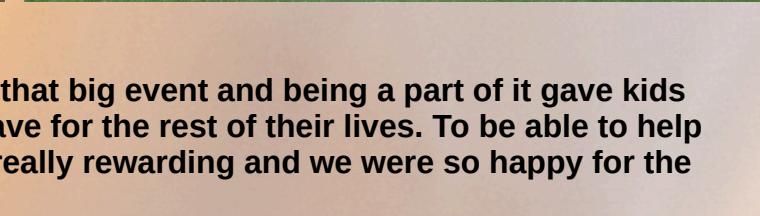
"We encourage coaches who have not yet tried it, don't be worried about it being football," Ali said. "You can still make the modifications to make it Unified and don't be afraid to give it a try, because it's definitely worth giving it a shot."

Ramos agreed, noting "there might be an intimidation factor for coaches at first, but I think you will be able to find the right way to set up the game so that it works for the ability levels of your athletes."

Ramos actually sees ways in which the complexities of football provide a unique opportunity for the Unified athletes and can bring in elements that might not exist for other sports.

"Because some of the skills are so specific it really can become about teaching simple actions for the kids. We have incorporated a lot of our football players and made them essentially assistant coaches, and then they help break down the different elements for everyone. Having the athletes focus on a smaller part of the game has helped us make it work."

He also recognizes, at least right now, his program is unique in the state. Both because of its relatively long existence and the size of its Unified team Enfield is able to offer the sport at a variety of levels for kids with greater and lesser needs. Which also means special experiences for Enfield, like taking part in the New England Special Olympics Championships at Gillette Stadium, home of the New England Patriots. Opportunities like that are much of the reason Ramos hopes to see the Unified flag football landscape in Connecticut continue expanding.



"I used to play flag football as an adult and my athletic director and myself are two of our powder puff football coaches, so when I heard flag football was a Unified option I reached out to the CIAC Unified staff and asked them if they could provide the kits for the sport," Ali explained. "We definitely expand as much as we can...it's almost an extension of our Unified PE program as we try to give them as much as we can and as many things as we can."

Derby handles its Unified program similar to a typical physical education class where a new sport or activity is introduced every few weeks. As the Unified athletes and partners became more comfortable and excited with the flag football portion of the season, the pair looked to branch out. They took the opportunity to schedule an event similar to the ones that take place regularly around the state in sports like basketball, track and field, and soccer among others.

The competitors were primarily schools within their athletic league with Oxford High School, and Woodland High School taking part, and then Ramos' Enfield squad was eager to take part.

"We are always excited to see it grow because at the end of the day that just means more kids are playing sports," Ali said. "The more people involved the more fun the kids get to have. They get to make new friends – there are some kids on neighboring programs our kids can't wait to see when they come over. But it's really fun for us to see a sport we both [her and Moffat] like growing and flourishing and it's nice to be a part of that push from the ground up."

Moffat echoed the excitement that comes with playing a role in bringing Unified flag football to a broader slate of schools.

"We are open to having a few more football events next year so if anyone is looking to start up a program and see what it's about, we welcome anyone to reach out to us. Our kids love football, they would love to keep playing football as much as they can. I think it's something the whole school really buys into."

"I think competing at that big event and being a part of it gave kids memories they will have for the rest of their lives. To be able to help make that happen is really rewarding and we were so happy for the kids."

It may happen slowly, or it could all come in a burst, but given the history of Unified Sports in Connecticut and the growing enthusiasm about flag football, a precipitous growth in Unified flag over the next decade feels likely. Unified Sports helps play a critical role in creating a more inclusive environment within schools, and pairing that with the power of football within a high school can create positive force to be reckoned with.

"Our pep rally right before winter break we knew exactly what we wanted to do," Moffat relayed. "We had so much fun with flag football last year that we actually did a Unified flag football game right in the gym. And we heard nothing but great feedback – that was the last thing we did before heading to the buses before break and it was so much fun to hear the crowd just absolutely ignite every single time the kids would score."

One of the highlights of the Connecticut Unified calendar each year is when teams from across the state play games at halftime in front of big crowds at Mohegan Sun Arena during the CIAC Basketball Championships. Maybe it is an unlikely dream but imagine if those culminating CIAC Football Championship events that took place with big crowds and big excitement featured Unified flag football teams taking the field at halftime for their own competitions.

It is a dream for now, but given the passion, energy, and commitment Unified coaches and athletes have long displayed across Connecticut, perhaps it is an attainable dream. And there might be only one word to describe what that feeling and opportunity could be like for the Unified athletes and partners in that scenario: touchdown!

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