

# Daily Record

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**Harlem Wizard remembers what it's like to bounce back**

**Epileptic's camp offers disabled kids self-esteem**

BY MICHAEL DAIGLE

Bouncing is something Mike Simmel understands.

As a professional basketball player with the Harlem Wizards and a featured halftime performer at camps, festivals and professional and college basketball games, Simmel, known as "Mighty Mike," bounces basketballs for a living -- sometimes four at once.

"I knew I was a showman in the sixth or seventh grade," said Simmel, who stands 5-feet-9-inches tall.

That is why he started his "Bounce Out the Stigma" basketball camp for children with mental and physical disabilities. The camp is scheduled to run for two weeks in August in Ho-Ho-Kus.

Camp co-director Alison Garbutt has degrees in education and special education and teaches students with behavioral disorders in Lodi.

Simmel was diagnosed with epilepsy as a child, and, he said, he could not hop on one leg or skip because of his slow motor skills. He was placed in special gym classes.

At age 7, Simmel was given a basketball by his father to see whether it would improve his motor skills.

Simmel said he eventually outgrew the epilepsy attacks, but in high school he had a grand mal seizure and once was in a coma with a 108-degree fever. He now takes medication that controls the disorder.



*'I knew I was a showman in the sixth or seventh grade,' said Mike Simmel, who combines entertainment with basketball prowess.*

## **Basketball camp**

The Mighty Mike Basketball Camp for children ages 9 to 16 with motor and learning deficiencies, "Bounce Out the Stigma," will be held from Aug. 14 to 18 and Aug. 21 to 25 at Ho-Ho-Kus Public Schools. Call (201) 725-7224 or visit [www.bounceoutthestigma.com](http://www.bounceoutthestigma.com). For information on Mike Simmel, visit [mightymikebasketball.com](http://mightymikebasketball.com).

## **'I survived'**

"I survived," Simmel said. "I consider myself a person with epilepsy."

Simmel has become a national spokesman for epilepsy awareness, and he speaks annually at Epilepsy Foundation of America events.

The message of survival is one that started him on the journey that now combines his awareness of his illness and his sports ability. The combination of motivational speaker and basketball showman came early.

"I used to speak at basketball camps for pizza money," he said.

But as a child, he said, he also was told that because of his illness, he was not good enough.

He has turned that rejection, the understanding of the pain it brings and the ability of an entrepreneur to the camp -- a venture that he hopes will help children like himself feel success.

Simmel said the basketball camp will offer children the chance to participate in sports and group activities that will be fun and encouraging, as well as courses for parents to help them deal with the stresses and situations that arise from having a special-needs child.

Simmel said special-needs youngsters who are attending other camps could find themselves in a situation like the one he did at age 16, when he had a seizure at summer basketball camp. He said he fought to stay at the camp, even though the staff wanted him to leave.

## **'We all have talent'**

"The message to the children is that we all have a gift, we all have talent, and we must make the most of it," Simmel said.

Melinda Jennis, president of Pathways for Exceptional Children of Montville, the organization that sponsored the local Harlem Wizards game, said her group has been working with Simmel as he organizes the August camp. She said her organization is talking to him about program ideas, planning, logistics and "things he might have not thought about."

Jennis her group is glad to be working with Simmel because of his history.

"He understands what these children are going through because he had epilepsy," she said. "He wants to give back to these children."

Jennis' Pathways group has raised \$180,000 since 2003 and has created 32 recreational programs. About 150 children ages 3 to 18 from 27 communities attend.

Pathways also has worked with the Montville School District to avoid litigation on individual cases involving students with disabilities.

Jennis said the key element in Simmel's concept is the emphasis on building self-esteem.

"The important things are the participation and the self-esteem building," she said.

"Self-esteem carries into all aspects of life. Working with disabled children, I know that nothing is so important. It is central to socialization, practicing skills, everything they will do in life. In my three years working with disabled children, I know there is a need for a place like this."