

# ABILITIES CENTRE

Bringing the community together.

By Sam Laskaris

**The Abilities Centre, a 125,000-sq.-ft. multi-use facility located in the town of Whitby, Ont., was designed as an inclusive environment for sports, health, wellness and fitness, and arts and cultural programming for all ages and abilities.**

In early February, the Centre was one of the sites for the Durham Region 2019 Ontario Paraspport Games. The facility hosted the sitting volleyball and boccia competitions as well as the Games' opening ceremonies.

Eight other venues also hosted the event that saw 350 athletes compete in 11 sports. Organizers of the three-day event projected \$500,000 was pumped into Durham Region's economy via visiting athletes, their families, coaches and support staff.

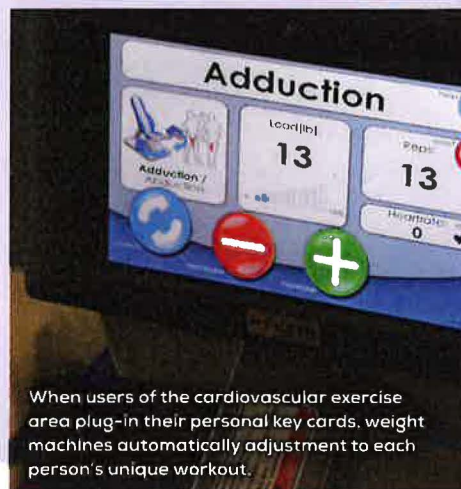
"It's a welcome boost to our local economy," says Games co-chair, Don Terry. "But the legacy that extends beyond the Games is just as important."

The legacy fund, expected to kick off with a minimum \$22,000, will help offset registration fees for Durham Region families who otherwise couldn't afford to enroll their children in sports and recreation programs. The fund will also be used to introduce high school students throughout Durham Region to parasport activities.

The Abilities Centre averages about 100,000 visitors per year. According to Leo Plue, the Centre's former executive director, the facility's primary users are elementary schoolchildren, young families and seniors. It's estimated as many as 15 per cent of visitors reside outside the town of Whitby.



Designed to allow as much natural daylight as possible, the fieldhouse features basketball courts, exercise equipment, a six-lane, 200-metre indoor track and more.



When users of the cardiovascular exercise area plug-in their personal key cards, weight machines automatically adjustment to each person's unique workout.



The ramp up to the second floor was designed without barriers and pillars, and the floor's textured and yellow colouring is particularly helpful to low-vision visitors.

The facility wasn't designed to make special accommodations, Plue explains. Rather, from wayfinding to barrier-free weight machines, the building was designed, first and foremost, to be entirely accessible to persons of all ages and abilities, including those with physical, cognitive and learning disabilities.

The able-bodied are welcomed here, too, and represent about 40 per cent of visitors. The majority, 60 per cent, is evenly split between those who take part in parasport programming and Special Olympics events. The Abilities Centre is home to the Academy for Student Athlete Development, a high-performance, holistic and inclusive athletic and academic program designed to support high school athletes.

"It really showcases how we can bring the whole community together," says Stuart McReynolds, president and CEO of the Centre.

In 2018, the Abilities Centre hosted nine weeks of provincial playdowns for the Ontario Basketball Association and four weekends of provincial testing for Rugby Ontario athletes.

The facility also hosted a provincial qualifier in rhythmic gymnastics, a three-day coaching clinic for Challenger Baseball, and the Ontario Cerebral Palsy Sport Association's boccia championships.

"We are always interested in speaking with organizers of major sporting events," says Dave Callan the Centre's director of marketing and brand strategy. "We're particularly interested in opportunities to host events that raise the profile of inclusion and accessibility." **A**

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