

From The Court To The Community: A Transformative Summer at the YMCA Sports Camp

By: Sohum Kunde

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Growing up, the sounds of laughter and the thud of a basketball hitting the ground were as familiar to me as the rhythm of my heartbeat. On every corner, park, and even in the most unlikely places, you could find kids, adults, and seniors of all backgrounds coming together to play sports. It didn't matter if we were dribbling a basketball on the cracked pavement of our neighborhood court or chasing after a soccer ball in a uneven grass field—the simple joy of the game united us. As I reflect on my journey, I realize that these experiences have not only deepened my love for sports but have also fueled my desire to teach and empower the future generation, helping others find the same sense of belonging and purpose that I did.

When I first signed up to volunteer at the YMCA sports camp, I thought it would be a fun way to spend my summer, indulging my love for sports while giving back to the community. Combining my passion for sports with a chance to mentor young kids was the perfect way to make a difference. However, my first days at the camp were anything but easy. The group's diversity—ranging from shy first-timers to overly enthusiastic young athletes—presented an unexpected challenge. I quickly realized that managing such a varied group required more than just knowledge of sports; it demanded patience, care, and a deep understanding of each child's unique needs.

As the days went by, I began to form connections with the campers. One camper who stood out was Melanie; a quiet girl who often sat on the sidelines and was more reserved and hesitant to participate. Determined to help her gain interest, I spent extra time with her, encouraging her to join in, praising her small victories, and slowly building her confidence. By the end of the week, she was not only participating in the activities but also looking forward to returning. Seeing her

transformation was moving and made me realize the powerful impact of personalized attention and encouragement.

My time at the YMCA sports camp was filled with valuable lessons that have deeply influenced me. I discovered the importance of perseverance, not just in sports, but in life, as I watched the campers push through their challenges and emerge stronger. I also realized that even small acts of kindness—like spending a few extra minutes with a shy camper—can have a profound impact. These experiences have stayed with me, shaping how I approach challenges both on and off the sports field. Inspired by these lessons, I co-founded Next Gen Athletics, a nonprofit dedicated to raising money through sports-related activities such as 1 vs. 1 football, 3 vs. 3 basketball, and pickleball tournaments. The funds we raise will go toward purchasing equipment for underprivileged schools. As I am currently in the process of becoming 501(c)(3) verified, I am driven by the desire to empower future generations, just as my volunteer experience at the YMCA has empowered me.

The impact of the YMCA sports camp extended beyond the individual campers. I made connections with my fellow volunteers, directors, and the staff. On the first day, I made it a point to learn each camper's name and understand their interests, knowing that building rapport early on would make future connections easier. Whether through a high-five after a well-played game, a few encouraging words to a child struggling to keep up, or simply listening to the kid's stories, I found that these small moments of connection made a big difference. The bonds we formed were rooted in our shared love for sports and our common goal of creating a positive experience for everyone involved.

Looking back, my experience at the YMCA sports camp was more than just a summer of fun and games; it was a journey of growth and learning. It taught me the value of patience, the power of encouragement, and the importance of empowering future generations. As a freshman

at Green Level, stepping into the world of volunteering for the first time was both exciting and a little intimidating. Being new to both high school and volunteering, I faced the challenge of navigating unfamiliar territory. However, as the days went by, I found myself growing more confident, not just in my role as a volunteer, but also in my ability to connect with others and make a positive impact. This experience has set the foundation for what I hope will be a long and fulfilling journey of giving back to my community.

One realization I had during my time at the YMCA sports camp is that sports are a universal language; it brings people together. Whether we're playing a game of soccer, basketball, or simply running races, we are all connected through a shared experience. At the camp, I witnessed kids from diverse backgrounds, with different personalities and skill levels, come together on the field. In those moments, it didn't matter where they came from or what challenges they faced outside the camp—what mattered was the camaraderie, teamwork, and empowerment of future generations.