

# Shrewsbury native and athlete Ryan Dixon elected into Special Olympics Hall of Fame

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WORCESTER — The next time Shrewsbury native Ryan Dixon participates in a Special Olympics event, it won't just be as an athlete, but as a Hall of Famer.

In June, Dixon, 37, was inducted into the Massachusetts Special Olympics Hall of Fame, surrounded by friends and family, accomplishing a dream he held for years.

“I was happy because I was with all of my family,” Dixon said. “I’m very proud.”

The Special Olympian said he was overwhelmed with emotion when he found out he was being inducted during the opening ceremony for a soccer final in November 2022. When they made the announcement, the crowd cheered for Dixon, chanting his name, he said.

“I was just in shock,” Dixon said.

His mother, Diane, who is a middle school special educator in Shrewsbury Public Schools, said she was very excited about Ryan finally getting the nomination.

Each year, she said, they held out hope that Dixon’s name would be announced for the Hall of Fame. And for his name to finally be called is the culmination of his hard work and determination.

Dixon received one of his biggest trophies yet and was able to give a little speech at a ceremony, held at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston.

“It's an incredible feeling. He works really, really hard,” Diane said. “He deserves it. He deserves the honor.”

## **A participant since age 8**

Dixon has been participating in Special Olympics since he was 8, taking a particular interest in bocce, basketball and soccer.

Dixon is the oldest of three, all of whom were very active in sports and athletic activities, Diane said. When Dixon went to her about wanting to do Special Olympics when he was young, they moved quickly to get him in.

For almost 30 years, Diane said, she has enjoyed watching him participate in the events, feeling proud of all of his achievements. The experiences, he said, have allowed him to develop deep friendships with teammates and travel around the country and world.

“I love it because it is perfect to meet people and make friends,” Dixon said.

Over the years, Dixon and his family have been able to travel to Iowa to watch him participate in the national games in bocce, to Nebraska for soccer and to Seattle for basketball.

In 2019, they traveled to Abu Dhabi to watch Dixon compete against other countries in basketball.

The trip to Abu Dhabi was fun, Dixon said, because it was like the Summer or Winter Olympics, with multiple countries participating, and opening and closing ceremonies for the athletes. Although, he said, the time change was a bit challenging.

Perhaps the most exciting moment was when Dixon's teammate made a half-court shot to end a game. In footage posted to YouTube, Dixon can be seen throwing himself into the teammate's arms to celebrate his achievement.

The play made it into the Top 10 plays segment on ESPN's SportsCenter.

## **Accolades from across Mass.**

Since being inducted to the Hall of Fame, Dixon has received accolades from around Massachusetts, including an official citation on behalf of the Massachusetts State Senate from Sen. Michael Moore, D-Millbury.

He received the citation at an event held at the Worcester Senior Center, where Dixon has worked for more than 10 years as a line cook at Bobby M's Diner, operated by Quinsigamond Community College.

"He loves it. He loves the people here," Diane said.

Dixon was joined by his aunt, Rebecca King, who also works at the senior center, and who helped him land the job at the diner.

Musician Cara Brindisi, a former contestant on "The Voice," attended high school with Dixon and also previously worked with him at the senior center. She also attended the event.

"I'm so proud of Ryan," Brindisi said, according to a news release from QCC. "He is a staple to the Worcester Senior Center, to this community and to the state."

When Dixon isn't busy with work or Special Olympics events, he is usually doing something to keep himself active, like bowling in one of three leagues, both candlepin and tenpin.

He's also active in fundraising for different causes. In February, Dixon took a dive into the water at Nantasket Beach in Hull to help raise money for the Special Olympics.

“I raised over \$6,000 for the Polar Plunge,” Dixon said

Just because Dixon has reached the top doesn't mean he has any plans to stop participating in the Special Olympics. And he thinks others should participate as well.

If they feel a bit hesitant, he said, they should try checking out a practice session to see how fun it can be.

“Special Olympics is my life,” Dixon said.