



# Coaching connections

A b-balling Baldwin Park resident teaches kids life lessons through sports

Story and photo by Sarah Wilson // Associate Editor

**F**or Linda Palonen, coaching basketball is more than just about teaching her team of fifth-grade boys how to perfect their free throws and jump shots.

For her, and all those involved with the Athletic Connections organization she coaches with in downtown Orlando, coaching gives her an opportunity to teach kids life skills through athletics.

"I have an opportunity to make a difference in these boys' lives and teach them the most important skills in life through sports," she said.

Sports and the lessons taught through them, Palonen knows firsthand, can take you places and carry you through life.

In 2000, Palonen moved from Finland to Central Florida after being recruited from across the world to play women's basketball for Stetson University. After graduating in 2003 with her degree in finance and in 2004 with her MBA, she landed in Baldwin Park and now works as a

financial planner for Resource Consulting in downtown Orlando.

Her journey, she said, started as a kid growing up active and healthy, and always outdoors playing sports. It's a lifestyle path of wellness and wisdom she's now working to pave for the next generation as a basketball coach for kids on her fifth-grade Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) basketball team, Game Speed, organized by the local nonprofit Athletic Connections Foundation.

Connections come together

"I never thought I'd want to coach," Palonen said, now sitting in the Orlando Downtown Recreation Complex gym, where her team practices twice a week for Junior Magic League play. "I thought I'd be too tough," she adds with a laugh.

Meeting former University of Florida basketball player Dan Cross, founder of Athletic Connections, which sponsors local sports teams and camps with the goal of teaching kids skills needed to succeed

on and off the court, changed her mind.

"She's a great coach.... She's just an integral piece of the program of involving former athletes giving back to the youth," Cross said.

Having played basketball at Stetson, and for the Finnish national team before coming to the U.S., and now being a successful career woman in Orlando outside of basketball, Cross said, made her the perfect mentor — and the league's first female coach.

"At first it was interesting, the boys were like, 'Wait, she's our coach?'" she said with a laugh. "But when I showed them up a little bit, they came around pretty quick."

The biggest lesson she's learned in coaching so far, she said, is that no matter what lessons you're trying to teach, whether it's moves on the court or tutoring before practice, it has to be fun.

"There's a time when it can be your

**INFO:** To learn more about the Athletics Connections program and how you can get involved, visit [acforyouth.org](http://acforyouth.org)

job, but for now it just needs to be fun," Palonen said.

In her second season of coaching, which wrapped up in July, her hard work in fun paid off with her fifth-grade team making it to nationals in Cocoa Beach where they played teams from across the country.

Having his group's youngest team make it to nationals, Cross said, was a great accomplishment, and one he gives great credit to Palonen for making it possible.

"She's been a great fit for the team," he said. "We're all about diversity and bringing people of different backgrounds together for one common goal of coming together to win a basketball game."

And whether they do win or lose, Palonen said, doesn't really matter in the end as long as they put the work in and learn lessons from the game.

"When you play hard, people notice," she said, "even if you don't win, necessarily."

Healthy on and off the court

Keeping healthy and active both on and off the court, Palonen says, has been a way of life for her since she was a child in Finland, and one she continues today living in Baldwin Park.

"Once you grow up that way, you can't just stop. It's really a lifestyle," she said. "If you don't get that mind-set incorporated in at a younger age, it's hard to start."

That, she said, is what makes programs such as Athletic Connections so important. It's about getting kids off the couch and away from video games and the Internet to focus on physical fitness and life skills.

"It's a good habit for kids out here to start at a young age," she said.


For her, it's a habit that's grown beyond basketball and into one that initially drew her into life in Baldwin Park five years ago.

"It's one of the only places in Orlando where you drive through and there's trees and all these people out walking and running, especially around the lake," she said. "It makes you want to go out and join them."

And she's been joining them ever since, out and about at the gym or running around the lake to get her daily dose of exercise.

"Once you get active, you have to stay active," she said. "That's when it becomes a lifestyle." \*

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