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Export date: Fri Oct 30 8:34:36 2026 / +0000 GMT

From Shelburne to Paris: Special Olympics athlete represents Canada on world stage

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Shelburne's Yazmine Wilson-Daponte returned home from Paris, France, with a fourth-place finish, a Women's Fair Play Team Award and memories of representing Canada on the international stage.

But for the 22-year-old Special Olympics athlete and her family, the trip was about much more than what happened on the soccer field.

It was Yazmine's first time travelling overseas without her family, giving her an opportunity to compete for Canada, make new friends and experience a part of the world she may otherwise never have visited.

?It truly is a trip of a lifetime,? said her mother, Karrie Daponte. ?To be able to go for a sport on her own, with a group of peers, was amazing.?

Yazmine was one of six athletes with intellectual disabilities on Ontario's Unified women's team, which represented Canada at the 2026 Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup in Paris from July 6 to 11.

The tournament brought together 24 teams from around the world, with Unified teams featuring athletes with and without intellectual disabilities competing side by side.

Canada faced Egypt, Slovakia and Hong Kong in group-stage play before finishing fourth overall.

For Yazmine, who had never previously travelled outside North America, the experience began long before she stepped onto the field.

She and her teammates spent months preparing for the tournament, including additional goalie training after she was selected as a backup goalkeeper about a week and a half before leaving for Paris.

The selection itself had been something of a surprise.

When Yazmine first attended the tryouts, her mother told her they were simply going to play soccer and learn some new skills. Yazmine did not realize she was being evaluated for a spot on Team Canada.

Daponte believes her daughter's enthusiasm and ability to encourage her teammates helped set her apart.

And that same enthusiasm followed Yazmine to Paris.

Canada was recognized with the Women's Fair Play Team Award, honouring the team's sportsmanship and conduct throughout the tournament.

Yazmine said she was proud of the recognition, particularly seeing her teammates cheer each other on and show respect to the other teams.

?It was all about sportsmanship and teamwork,? Daponte said. ?They were giving high-fives to everybody. They were very polite to the other teams.?

The Fair Play Award was particularly fitting for a player whose selection had been influenced by more than athletic ability.

Special Olympics Ontario said the athletes chosen for the team were selected for their commitment to inclusion, teamwork and community leadership, as well as their athletic skills.

For Yazmine, those qualities have been developed through years of participating in sports and community programs.

She now takes part in a long list of activities, including Special Olympics baseball, bocce and track and field, as well as bowling, basketball and curling during the winter. She also participates in snowboarding through a program at Horseshoe Valley Resort in Barrie.

Her involvement in sport has helped build confidence and independence, according to her mother.

?She is just very proud,? Daponte said. ?She doesn't always have the words to say it, but she's very proud.?

The trip to Paris was another significant step in that development.

Yazmine travelled without her family, something Daponte described as an accomplishment in itself. Although Yazmine has experience attending overnight camps, travelling by plane to another country and spending more than a week with a new team was a different challenge.

?She went on her own, so that in itself was a big accomplishment,? Daponte said.

Once in Paris, there was little time to sit still.

The team had early-morning games after a heat wave forced organizers to adjust the schedule, along with practices and other activities. When she wasn't playing soccer, Yazmine and her teammates had opportunities to explore the city.

She saw the Eiffel Tower, took a boat tour, visited a museum and spent lots of time walking around Paris.

She also experienced the camaraderie that comes with being part of a team travelling halfway around the world.

?We had a lot of fun,? Yazmine said.

For Daponte, watching her daughter experience those moments brought the significance of the trip into focus.

Yazmine was once nonverbal, and Daponte said she has spent years watching her daughter reach milestones that might seem small to others but carry enormous meaning for their family.

Getting to Paris was another of those milestones, made possible in part by the support of the local community.

Yazmine raised more than $2,500 toward her trip, exceeding her individual fundraising target. The team's fundraising efforts also helped support athletes who were unable to raise enough money themselves.

In June, a celebrity server fundraiser at Orangeville Boston Pizza raised $762.25 toward Yazmine's travel costs, with additional support coming from local businesses, families and residents.

Yazmine said she was grateful to everyone who helped her reach Paris.

?Thank you, everyone in Shelburne. Thank you, Orangeville, Dufferin County. Thank you to everyone that donated to Team

Canada,? Yazmine said.

The community also followed along while she was overseas, with supporters watching livestreams of the games and cheering her on from home.

For Daponte, the trip represented something much bigger than a soccer tournament.

She recalled people questioning whether Yazmine belonged in a mainstream school and doubting what she would be capable of accomplishing.

Then, roughly a year later, her daughter was boarding a plane to Europe as a member of Team Canada.

?I don't like when people don't think that they can do things,? Daponte said. ?With the proper things in place, they can.?

Now home, Yazmine has already moved on to her next challenges.

She continues to play sports throughout the year and is looking forward to more opportunities with Special Olympics.

But for Daponte, the significance of Paris goes beyond the result on the field. It is another milestone in a series of accomplishments that once seemed far less certain.

?Those little successes may not mean anything to anybody else, but to her, to us, it's a big thing,? Daponte said.