

Shelburne athlete heading to Special Olympics World Cup in Paris



Written By SAM ODROWSKI

Shelburne's Yazmine Wilson-Daponte is headed to Paris, France, this summer after earning a spot on Team Canada's roster for the 2026 Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup.

"I'm very excited for Paris," she said. "I'm excited to meet new friends there. I'm excited to have a good time."

Yazmine, 22, will join her 10 teammates from across the province for an international competition featuring teams from 24 countries. Team Canada will play matches against Egypt, Slovakia, and Hong Kong in group-stage play from July 6 to 11.

Unified sports teams, such as the one Yazmine is competing with in Paris, pair athletes with and without intellectual disabilities. This helps athletes with disabilities thrive alongside their teammates who can set them up for plays and mentor them off the field.

Yazmine, who has autism, is among six athletes with intellectual disabilities on Team Canada.

Her mother, Karrie Daponte, said while her daughter may not fully grasp the scale of the opportunity, she is elated in her own way, and the significance may catch up to her once she's on the soccer field in Paris.

"She is so excited to be on the team and wear the uniform? but she doesn't really understand what an opportunity this is," said Daponte.

That opportunity began with a tryout. One where Yazmine had no idea she was being evaluated.

Daponte simply told her daughter they were going to play soccer with some women and learn new skills. They attended three sessions that way, with no pressure, no expectations.

"I never thought she would make it," Daponte said. "I personally think she was picked because of her enthusiasm? when she plays soccer she's always encouraging everybody, and all you hear is her."

Yazmine's enthusiasm and encouragement of teammates didn't go unnoticed.

Special Olympics Ontario said during tryouts, athletes were selected not only for their athletic ability but also their commitment to inclusion, teamwork and community leadership.

By that measure, Yazmine was a natural fit.

Team Canada needs to raise \$1,500 per athlete (part of a \$25,000 goal) for the costs associated with playing abroad. To help reach that goal, Yazmine is participating in a Celebrity Server Night at Orangeville Boston Pizza on June 2 from 5 to 8 p.m., with a men's soccer jersey raffle.

Anyone looking to support the team with donations can visit specialolympicsontario.crowdchange.ca/128961.

She's also collecting Canadian-themed pins and maple leaf memorabilia to trade with athletes from other countries, and is encouraging donations.

For Daponte, Yazmine's journey to Paris represents something much bigger than soccer.

"At one point, she was nonverbal, so you appreciate all the little things," Daponte said.

She has navigated the challenges of raising a child with autism largely out of public view ? from meltdowns during drives to sports to uncertainty about the future

Daponte kept Yazmine involved in the community, not because it was easy, but because it was necessary. Yazmine thrives outside the home, and her mother recognized early that giving her every opportunity to be part of something, whether it was a team, a program, or a community, was the best thing she could do.

Those years of showing up, pushing through, and appreciating every small step forward, led Yazmine here ? a flight to Paris and a place on Team Canada.

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