

# The power of active play

**Robbie Johnson**

How do you fit 30 years of memories into a sunflower seed bucket? “You don’t,” said Joe Roberts of Terriers Sports. “Our bucket overflows with memories and we just keep adding to it.”

“The Bucket” has been “The Stanley Cup” for local kids since 1991 at Terriers, a community-based youth development program featuring student coaching, music and media programs to “rock” youth sports.

As the organization celebrates its 30th anniversary this summer, we asked Joe to reflect on its history and share his vision to transform the pandemic’s challenges into needed positive transformational change. “Our programs have always been focused on fun,” said Roberts. “They still are, but as times have changed our organization’s mission has become increasingly more therapeutic.”

“Seventy percent of kids quit organized sports by the age of 13,” he said with concern, citing a George Washington University study, “with the number one reason that sports aren’t fun.”

“For too long, too few have noticed or cared, but when COVID took play away, we all saw the damaging effects,” Roberts said.

“Beyond fun, we teach kids that sports and life are full of unexpected challenges, but with grit and determination hardships can be turned into opportunities to build strength and fuel growth,” continued Roberts. “One of the many silver linings of the pandemic is that society is now aware that active play is absolutely essential for our well being, and that kids and adults everywhere need much more of it.”

Roberts points to two disturbing trends that he believes need to be reversed. “The emergence of smartphones, social media, the internet and video games have resulted in growing electronics addiction, interpersonal social retraction, inactivity and obesity profoundly affecting youth at increasingly earlier ages. Simultaneously, decreasing trends in community recreation, a critically needed source of physical, social and emotional development, have created a ‘perfect storm’ further intensified by COVID, resulting in spiking increases in youth anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts.”

“All are solvable with organic remedies, but require dedicated focus, support and innovation,” he added.

In 2014 Roberts teamed with local parents to found a non-profit organization to raise awareness and support the physical, social and emotional wellness of children through active play. Community Investors’ “PlayRox” initiative provides pro-



The first Terriers team on June 26, 1991. COURTESY JOE ROBERTS



Terriers celebrating their 30th anniversary rocking the power of play. COURTESY PHOTO

gramming and management of interactive and inclusive play-based experiences inspired and developed from Terriers’ three decades.

“Serving diverse groups, Terriers and CI have developed a highly innovative formula creating elevated levels of joy, an essential element motivating lasting engagement in active play, a critical need as society competes increasingly with virtual reality,” remarked John McCarthy, director of Boston University’s Athletic Coach Institute, who advises the PlayRox initiative. “Based on studies of music having a positive effect on movement and social emotional development, their key and unique dynamic is a fusion of student music and coaching programs energizing experiences in choreographed active play. They are truly innovators empowering students to lead peers to impactful enjoyment in fun, inclusive, and autonomous environments.”

“While we have always been about fun, we take pride in the many leaders our programs helped develop,” recalled Roberts. “Similar to our programs mixing multiple sports, our alumni have excelled and serve in many ways as teachers,

first responders, entrepreneurs, music and media professionals along with many athletic and coaching success stories.”

Nate Freiman leads the list. After setting the Duke University home run record, he climbed baseball’s Mount Everest to play for the Oakland A’s, and is now an executive for the Cleveland Indians. Freiman recalls, “Terriers was such an important part of my life growing up. Over the years I went to and coached at many programs but I’ve never seen anything close to the fun, energetic environment of Terriers!”

Drew Petzing, an NFL coach with the Cleveland Browns, reflected that “my desire to pursue a career in coaching was strongly influenced by the many memorable weeks I spent at Terriers. After playing as a kid, I jumped at the opportunity to follow in the steps of the coaches I learned from to give back the great experiences I enjoyed.”

Rocking through the pandemic while many town and school programs were shuttered, Terriers and Community Investors provided remarkable service with 314 safely managed active play programs. Their service earned recognition from the President’s

Council on Sports, Fitness and Nutrition and the United States Department of Health and Human Services as a National Youth Sports Strategy Champion and a request from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Joint Education Committee to serve more communities.

While dedicated to expanding reach and impact, Terriers is embracing the present moment celebrating its 30th summer returning to the Bates Elementary School and Kelley fields. “Elsa Bucket Day captured what it’s all about,” shared Roberts. “At our morning talk, with a hurricane keeping us inside, we committed to making the best of what we had. We ended up with three All-Time Top Plays in one day! Only 55 plays have made the All-Time list over 30 years, so it was truly special.”

Decker Bannish’s buzzer-beating, 3 pointer saved the Hoop Bucket for his team, rocking the “TerrierDome” (aka, gym) and leading to an overtime win. To top that, Devon Morton, the only girl Dodgeballer mixing it up with 25 middle- and high school boys, was the last Terrier standing to cap an epic team comeback. And a mix of elementary, middle- and high-

school students rocked an action-packed first-ever Terriers Lax game in the gym. “A packed gym, music pumping, kids storming the court and energy through the roof at the neighborhood elementary school,” recalled Roberts. “That’s who we are and what our kids need.”

## NEXT UP: COMMUNITY YOUTH ASSESSMENT

After Terriers rocks Bates through July, the Community Investors team will turn its focus to helping to launch a community youth assessment, helping to connect town and private resources to study and raise awareness of the critical challenges facing youth, and the need for additional support and collaboration to provide organic remedies.

The “Terriers Archives,” including an updated All-Time Top Play List, Hall of Fame, vintage photos and Channel 5 news features are viewable at Terriers-Sports.com. Information on Community Investors and their PlayRox Initiative is also available at CommunityInvestors.net.

*Robbie Johnson is a Wellesley High School alum ('08) who attended Terriers as a camper and coach.*