

High-Five Friday Welcomes Team Iowa

The Village Panthers had the opportunity to participate in Sheldon Community School’s “High-Five Friday,” a special event that allows the students of the local elementary school to high-five different groups as they walk in or out of the school.

The Panthers greeted the students on the morning of May 1 as they arrived at school, sharing high-fives and smiles to kick off the day. Following the morning welcome, students gathered outside to cheer on and wave as the athletes and coaches rode around the school on a fire truck, waving to the crowd.

The event was a fun opportunity for the students to celebrate and encourage the Panthers as they prepared for the 2026 Special Olympics USA Games.



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SPECIAL EDITION

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Panthers Celebrated at Pep Rally and Send-Off

The Village Panthers, representing Team Iowa in the 2026 Special Olympics USA Games, were celebrated on Friday, June 19, at the Wansink Center. A pep rally was held, honoring and sending off the Panthers volleyball team on their trip to Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The community came together by filling goodie bags for the athletes, which were presented to each team member during the pep rally. The event also included introductions of each athlete, a hype video, short speeches from several athletes, performances by the cheer squad, and a pep talk.

To wrap up the celebration, family members, friends, staff, and supporters lined Village Circle and the street to give the team a memorable send-off. The athletes rode through campus on a fire truck, accompanied by a police escort, as the crowd cheered them on their way to the 2026 Special Olympics USA Games.

“It felt like there were people actually there for me and that made me feel really happy inside,” athlete Keyanna Brower commented. Brower also created an original song using AI that was played at the pep rally. One verse reads:

“Mistakes don’t define us, we stumble and fumble, we try again. We make a mistake, we move on. Wherever we go, whoever we play, set, spike, bump, serve – volleyball, here we come! Go Panthers!”

Another athlete, Charles White, described how he felt when he saw everyone cheering for him as “good, happy, and excited,” along with many other athletes.

The pep rally and send-off marked the beginning of the Panthers’ trip to Minneapolis, where they represented Team Iowa at the 2026 Special Olympics USA Games.



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Village Panthers Earn Bronze at the 2026 Special Olympics USA Games

The Village Panthers proudly represented Team Iowa at the 2026 Special Olympics USA Games, bringing home a bronze medal in traditional volleyball after an exciting week of competition in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

From June 22-25, nine Panther athletes competed alongside more than 4,500 athletes and coaches from all 50 states in one of the largest and most prestigious Special Olympics events in the nation.

Representing the Panthers were Allison Ernst, Charles White, Colby Huffman, Dan De Boer, Isabel Back, John List, Keyanna Brower, Travis Klein, and Scott Wheeler. The team was coached by Deb Middle, Sara Wolthuizen, and Mindy Liechti. Matt Kramer was also a member of the team, but was unable to travel with the team to compete.

Competition took place at 3M Arena at Mariucci on the University of Minnesota campus. Throughout the week, the Panthers faced talented teams from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Missouri, Alabama, and Texas. Every match challenged the team to work together, communicate, and give its best effort.

While earning a bronze medal was an amazing accomplishment, the week was about much more than final standings. Athletes had the opportunity to meet competitors from across the United States, experience the excitement of the USA Games, and create memories that will last a lifetime.

The athletes were asked what one memory they will always remember from that week. Huffman said, “I had fun while getting to play volleyball, as well as walking nine miles in one day!”

“We’re so proud of them. They represented the Village and our state really well with their hard work and sportsmanship,” Wolthuizen shared.

Congratulations to our Village Panthers on an unforgettable week, a well-earned bronze medal, and an incredible accomplishment on the national stage!

