A special fund for special athletes.

Area Special Olympians will now have a fund directly benefiting their efforts with the creation of the **Central Illinois Athletic Fund** through the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln.

“For a lot of years going back there has been discussion of the need to find another method of supporting athletes in Special Olympics’ Area 17 that was directed by people in the central Illinois,” said Larry Swartz, who coaches area Special Olympian swimmers. “The state Special Olympics is a very good organization and they do tremendous work, but they have to make decisions that focus on the entire state, that take the interest of the whole state. This fund will focus exclusively on local athletes.”

The fund was started with a gift from Mr. Stanley Yasinski, who is friends with Mary Lou Mudd and her daughter Stephanie, who has Downs Syndrome and competes in Special Olympics. Yasinski donated to the state Special Olympics in the past, but preferred to keep his future donations on the local level.

“He wanted to have more say in how it was used,” Mary Lou Mudd said. “We wanted to keep it more local for the athletes.”

Sangamon County and bits of the surrounding area are part of “Area 17” in the State Special Olympic map. More than 450 area residents competed in Special Olympics last year. The fund will help coaches provide the necessary equipment and training for these athletes.

In the past, coaches and athletes’ families provided the extra funding needed. A benefit to starting the fund with the Community Foundation is that any donations made to the fund are tax deductible.

“It’s always a struggle to make sure there are sufficient funds to cover the expenses that are needed,” Swartz said.

Special Olympics provides a multitude of important facets to the fabric of the athletes that compete. “That is her social life,” Mudd said of her daughter.

It also teaches patience and effort and sportsmanship.

Larry Swartz is also the father of an athlete. “There is value for him being able to participate in athletics and be able to be rewarded some for his efforts,” Swartz said. “He is a lot more social. He is a lot better sport.”

Swartz will be joined by Keith Strubbe and Bob Pietras on a 3-person committee that oversees the awarding of grants from the funds.