

Bonding with baseball

By Erin Sauder ~ For The Courier-News

Last Modified: Sep 9, 2012 02:58AM

When Machonne Williams' son, Matthew, was born 11 years ago, doctors said because of his cerebral palsy he would likely never walk.

But with intensive therapy, he was able to prove his doctors wrong.

These days, the Bartlett resident is thriving, and he was one of more than 80 children participating in the first Tri Cities Little League Challenger Jamboree Friday and Saturday at the Randall Oaks baseball facility in West Dundee.

Challenger is a division of Little League that is designed for mentally and/or physically challenged children, allowing them to play organized baseball. The Challenger players are able to play baseball on the same fields, using the same equipment, while being cheered on by fans and enjoying the many benefits of Little League.

Williams said her son enjoys being a part of the program.

"He loves this because these kids are truly his friends and people he can trust," she said.

Her son has been in the Challenger program for six years and she has watched him and his teammates flourish.

"I enjoy the success of the whole thing, from the kids being able to put a glove on, to cheering each other on, to celebrating after the game," she said.

During the baseball games Saturday, as was the case throughout the season, buddies played side-by-side on the field with the special needs players, assisting them through batting, running the bases, catching and defense, and hanging out with them in the dugout as they root for their team.

The Jamboree brought in 12 teams from Little League District 13, which includes 14 neighboring communities, three of which currently have active Challenger divisions — Tri Cities (East and West Dundee, Carpentersville, Sleepy Hollow, and Gilberts), Bartlett, and Woodstock.

Huntley resident Becky Toepfer was at Saturday's game to watch her son, Braeden, who has autism, play.

"This is the first time we've ever done anything like this before," she said.

Through the program, she was able to watch her son bond with another team member.

"And bonding isn't something he usually does," she said.

Besides baseball, the weekend's jamboree featured hay rides, crafts, games, face painting, bonfires and more. Players could also visit the petting zoo and handicap-accessible golf course for free.

Mark Johnson, Little League's District 13 Challenger coordinator, was excited about the turnout.

"This was my first try at this and 85 kids on the first try isn't bad," he said.

As for the Challenger program, he said it's great for everyone involved.

"The players get to enjoy the Little League experience, and the buddies get to enjoy spending time with the players teaching them about the game," he said. "It makes our community a better place. It's a win-win-win."

The players themselves were more than ready to start the games Saturday.

Algonquin resident Danny Koerner, 11, was all smiles when asked favorite part of playing baseball.

"I like hitting the ball," he said.

Gilberts resident April Opat, 14, was also ready to get on the field.

"Baseball is my favorite," she said.