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Buddy baseball gives kids a chance at classic sport

By **Jessica Cilella**

Dean Klassman doesn't have special needs children of his own, but his dedication to buddy baseball teams in the suburbs might make you think he does.

The Buffalo Grove resident has many reasons for why he spends three days a week coaching a game of baseball that sometimes has only three or four innings and can take upward of two hours to play.

He loves the way young volunteers — the buddies — bond with their special needs partners, whom they accompany around the baseball diamond, pushing a wheelchair or helping throw a ball.

He is inspired by the self-esteem boosts he sees in the athletes he coaches and how ecstatic they are to play a classic American sport that some of them may have never dreamed possible.

And he would be thrilled, like the leaders of a handful of other buddy baseball organizations throughout the suburbs, to expand the reach of the programs he works for, including the Buffalo Grove Recreation Association and Keshet, a Jewish organization serving special needs individuals in the Northern suburbs.

"It's just an unbelievable experience with these kids," Klassman said. "The smiles on their faces, the unconditional love. They're a gift."

Fields of dreams

Buddy baseball appears to have started up in a few suburbs more than a decade ago, and it continues to slowly expand into new geographic areas.

This year, for example, a new team was created in Woodstock under the auspices of the Challenger Division of Little League International. Challenger Divisions in the Tri-Cities and Bartlett helped the Woodstock team get up to the plate. And there's a Challenger Division in Libertyville.

While most games are played on regular fields, there are a handful of specialized fields, including Kendrigan Field, which opened in 2007 in Buffalo Grove.

In Roselle, Miracle Field is the fitting name for a lighted and fully handicapped-accessible baseball diamond that opened in 2004 thanks to fundraising efforts by the Bloomingdale-Roselle Rotary Clubs. The Western DuPage Special Recreation Association runs games at the field every spring, summer and fall, said Becky Prince, the association's manager of athletics.

For the first 20 minutes, Prince said, they work on skills, and then the three-inning game begins.

Everyone bats and the kids move one base at a time. There are no outs and the last person hits a home run, bringing the remaining players in.

"I think it gives everyone an opportunity to be like their peers," she said. "It may not look exactly the same, but at least they're out there."

In DuPage County, buddy baseball is also offered by the Wheaton Junior Women's Club.

Enrollment numbers

According to Little League International, 14 Illinois municipalities have a Challenger Division. Enrollment has increased each year for the past three years, from 570 in 2009 to 735 in 2011, while the number of teams went from 38 to 49.

However, some local organizers — including those from Wheaton, Bartlett and the Keshet league — say that in recent years their enrollment numbers have declined slightly. For example, enrollment went down by about 44 percent in two years, from 93 kids to 49, in Bartlett.

There doesn't seem to be a universal reason. Some say perhaps it's because special needs kids now have more programming available to them than ever before, or maybe their schedules are too packed with therapy sessions or doctors' appointments.

"I think it's a matter of if it fits into someone's schedule," Prince said, adding that she hasn't seen decreased enrollment with her teams, but that she would like to get more players involved. "I think there are just a lot of other avenues for people (with special needs)."

Everyone's a winner

Klassman said the benefit of baseball for special needs kids is that each player gets a chance in the spotlight, whereas one child may take the lead in other sports like soccer or basketball.

Paul Williams became the director of baseball operations for the Bartlett Little League Challengers Division this year after seeing the way it benefited his two children with special needs.

"The thing that the league does in general, and I saw this with my oldest son (who has high functioning cerebral palsy), was that it gave him self-confidence," he said, adding that his son and many other kids who play in the division also start participating in Special Olympics.

Williams says he is impressed with the interactions that the buddy volunteers — who are usually non-disabled Little League players — have with the players.

"It's an experience for them as well," he said. "They want to be the buddies. Back in my day it was stigma."

Prince said volunteers can expect to "feel a sense of accomplishment." In some instances, she said, an athlete can't even throw a ball in the first week of the season and by the end the athlete with the help of a buddy is able to get it to the right person.

Williams stressed that parents of special needs kids should give buddy baseball a try because they will enjoy how smoothly it is run and the opportunities it gives their children.

"Parents always have to fight for services and things for their child," he said. "Here they don't have to fight. It's there for them, and that's what we're trying to tell people."