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Special-needs players to take field for Little League World Series exhibition

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WOODSTOCK – A few kids in Woodstock who didn't have the opportunity to play Little League baseball before last year will take the field on the sport's biggest stage.

Illinois' District 13 was selected to field a team from its three special-needs Challenger leagues – Woodstock, Bartlett and Tri-Cities – to compete in an exhibition game at Volunteer Stadium in South Williamsport, Pa., the site of the Little League World Series. The game will precede the Little League World Series International and U.S. championship games Aug. 24.

District 13 and its opponent, District 57 in Livermore, Calif., were selected from 900 Challenger leagues worldwide to play the exhibition, which will air on ESPN3.

"This is a big deal to get selected to go," said Mark Johnson, who's in charge of District 13 Challenger leagues. "To play on the same day as the international championship and the U.S. championship games, on ESPN, is what every Little Leaguer dreams of."

Each Challenger League player is paired with a "buddy" throughout the game for assistance. The league puts children on the field who otherwise might not get a chance to play.

"My son is a perfect example. He has cerebral palsy, and he loves sports, but he can't play on a regular team," said Rochelle Donahue, Woodstock Challenger vice president. "It's given him the opportunity to get out there and run the bases, put on a uniform and just have fun with it."

Last year was the first year for Challenger League baseball in McHenry County. About 35 players are involved with the Woodstock league, which is now taking registrations for the new season.

Donahue said many people in her league already have expressed interest in going on the trip.

Managers now are faced with selecting a team of 15 children from a district of more than 165. Right

now, they're gathering interest.

"From that, we will select a group of 15 – 15 players, 15 buddies – to represent us," Johnson said. "I think most kids want to go, it's just we have to pay our own way there. So we're going to have to do some significant fundraising to get these kids there."



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