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Saturday, June 10, 2006



John T. Greilick/The Detroit News

Luke Tyrrell, 6, of Beverly Hills follows through on a pitch from Stephen Peck, the president of the Miracle League of Michigan. Tyrrell is among 135 kids in the program.

A league of their own

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Baseball program hits a home run for special kids with special needs

Angelique S. Chengelis / The Detroit News

SOUTHFIELD -- For a moment, 11-year-old Alex Darr was just like every other kid who loves to talk about and play baseball.

This red-headed chatterbox from Brighton enjoys trash-talking the pitcher, rattling off statistics and admires home-run hitters, especially his friend and teammate, Drew Frazier, nicknamed "Space Shuttle" because he rounds the bases low with his arms extended like wings.

Darr enthusiastically announced his intention to set the record this summer for inside-the-park home runs.

Then, he threw a curve that briefly grounded the conversation in reality.

"Here's some health history," Darr said matter-of-factly, offering the information without being asked. "I was born with CP (cerebral palsy), and they're working on a cure for that. And that's probably all I know about my health history."

Darr is confined to a wheelchair, but as far as he is concerned, he is like every other kid.

"I don't feel different at all," he said without hesitation.

Helping Darr and more than 100 children from Metro Detroit with mental and physical disabilities feel more like other kids is the Miracle League of Michigan, a special league for special-needs children that gives them an opportunity to play baseball all summer.

The league, in its third year in this area, has

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John T. Greilick/The Detroit News

Randy Cuthrell of Royal Oak helps his son, Corey, 10, get a base hit. Corey is on the Cardinals in the Miracle League of Michigan, which is in its third year.

[See full image](#)

Miracle League of Michigan

What: Baseball for children with mental and physical disabilities

Where: Wal-Mart Field, Southfield Municipal

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135 kids scattered among various teams, such as the Tigers, Marlins and Cardinals -- and there is a waiting list.

Wal-Mart Field is a well-groomed facility that features a rubberized, flat baseball field that accommodates wheelchairs, dugouts for each team, spectator bleachers and a small building that houses the public-address announcer and his state-of-the-art sound system.

Games are two innings and last about 1 hour, 15 minutes. Every kid gets to bat, every kid hits, every kid scores and every kid plays in the field. There are no outs in the Miracle League.

Apparently, they truly are all winners.

"Although the rules may seem lax, when you watch them play, you'll see they're playing baseball to them," said Stephen Peck, president and founder of Miracle League of Michigan.

"They all seem to get it."

A family's passion

Peck is the heart and soul of the Miracle League of Michigan. It is his passion, one that his wife, Susan, and 16-year-old son, Ryan, share.

He was inspired several years ago while watching an HBO special that included a segment on the Miracle League. So inspired, he sold his business and threw himself into this project without fully contemplating the financial burden and risk.

"I lost my dad when I was 6 years old," Peck said. "I don't know if that has anything to do with my passion for kids, but I absolutely have always loved kids. When I saw this on HBO Sports, I thought, 'This is a calling.'"

The Miracle League, formed in 1998, has 143

Complex

Cost: Summer league is filled (fee is \$50 and includes jersey, hat, trophy and Tigers tickets). Sign-up for the six-week fall league has begun. It is \$25 and games begin Sept. 2. Space is limited to 60 kids. If a family is unable to pay the fee, the organization attempts to find a corporate sponsor to handle the fee.

Other leagues: The adult league (ages 20-50) plays Monday and Tuesday nights, and the senior league Thursday mornings.

Volunteer: The League is always seeking volunteers. If interested, click on the "volunteer" link on the Web site, MichiganMiracle.org.

What else: Beginning in mid-June, Wal-Mart and Sam's Club stores will feature Miracle League displays with Pepsi products. Also, Miracle League day is July 16 at Comerica Park. The kids will be part of an on-field celebration before the 1:05 p.m. Royals-Tigers game.

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organizations across the country. There are 41 completed rubberized fields, 61 are under construction and there are 30 ground-breakings scheduled. Peck would like to add several fields throughout the state, but first things first as he focuses his attention and work on Wal-Mart Field in the Southfield Municipal Complex.

Last season, he added an adult league that plays Monday and Tuesday nights. This year, Peck has added a senior-citizens league that will use the field Thursday mornings.

He is driven, though, by the kids' league that includes children with any type of disability. "Anything that prohibits a child from playing in an organized youth sport," Peck said. "That could be mental or physical. Whether it's Down's syndrome, autism, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, blindness, deafness, missing limbs, whatever the case, they're welcome here."

It is quite clearly a safe haven for children with disabilities who just want to have fun, and for their parents who very much want them to experience the joy of athletics.

Peck has sacrificed plenty. In the first year, he had \$200,000 in debt, and that was even after one contractor waived a \$50,000 fee for digging out the area for the field.

"I talked contractors into doing work on my word that I would have the money for them, and here we were playing the first season, and I didn't have the money for them," Peck said.

"I had builders coming to me, like this, 'Steve, we like what you're doing, but we need our money.'"

There are advertiser banners along the outfield



John T. Greilick/The Detroit News

Luke Tyrrell, 6, of Beverly Hills proves he's a skilled hitter by connecting on a pitch.

[See full image](#)

wall, but it was Wal-Mart that came to bat when Peck needed help. The Miracle League of Michigan received more than \$200,000 to pay off the debt, and Peck decided the field should be named for Wal-Mart.

"When I told them we were going to name it Wal-Mart Field, they said, 'You know what, you don't need to do that. If you want to go out sell, make more money, go for it,•'" Peck said.

'Pure joy'

The Miracle League of Michigan's third youth season opened nearly three weeks ago on a stunningly sunny day, with a brilliant blue sky. Perfect baseball weather.

Amy Tyrrell made the mistake of telling her 6-year-old son, Luke, a few days before opening day that the game was coming up. It was all Luke, who has Down's syndrome and is a member of the Cardinals, could think about in the days leading up to game time.

"When you have a child with special needs, you always wonder if they're ever going to participate in sports, which is something that makes you feel a little sad as a parent," said Tyrrell, who also brings 3-year-old, Danny, to the games to watch his brother. "We found out about this league three years ago and immediately signed up.

"He's mainstreamed in the public schools, so he's in with everyone. He knows that other kids play baseball, and when they talk about it, he can tell kids he's on the baseball team. It's an amazing source of pride for him. It's a confidence-builder. It's such a great perspective on ... I think anybody who feels sorry for themselves should come here and watch a game. It's remarkable."



John T. Greilick/The Detroit News

Stephen Peck holds a microphone for Alex Darr, 11, of Brighton, who is renowned as one of the league's top trash-talkers.

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John T. Greilick/The Detroit News

Volunteer Katelin Simon of the Hillsdale College softball team pushes Hannah Caton, 5, around the bases after a hit.

[See full image](#)

Hope Sovran was born with spina bifida, a spinal cord defect that has paralyzed her from the waist down. This 10-year-old with a bright face has had 74 surgeries.

"She's a veteran of the hospital," her father, Andrew, said.

Though confined to a wheelchair, Hope also is a member of the Cardinals. After rounding the bases, Hope beamed as she found her father to celebrate.

"This is so fun," Hope told him, with the emphasis on *so fun*.

Sovran has nine children ranging from 2 to 18. Hope is the seventh.

"She has a good time here," Sovran said. "She has fun with it. It's a special event for her instead of for one of her siblings, so they all come watch her play."

Billy Perkin is 8 years old, and although he does not have a specific disability, he has some general delays in speech and gross motor movements. He understands what is going on around him and communicates well, although he has very little speech.

For his father, Robert, watching Billy play baseball is more than fulfilling. It's a toss-up who enjoys the games more.

"This is a big deal for us," Robert Perkin said.

"When he runs to first base, he gets a huge smile on his face every single time. It's just incredible joy. Pure joy."

Perkin has three sons, but Billy is the oldest. Perkin said Billy has enriched all of their lives in immeasurable ways.

"I grew up playing sports," Perkin said. "I've been a sports guy my whole life, and you always have a notion that your first son is going to do all the sports you did."



John T. Greilick/The Detroit News

Drew Frazier, 15, of Troy races to the plate, displaying the form that has earned him the nickname of "Space Shuttle" in the league. [See full image](#)



John T. Greilick/The Detroit News

Stephen Peck said he was inspired several years ago while watching an HBO special that included a segment on the Miracle League. [See full image](#)

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"It brings us into a whole world of kids with special needs. I think most people are a bit intimidated by kids who are different, and when you get into this world, you realize first of all there are a lot of people living this life. The kids are special. You have to get over some of the challenges like communication, getting over their different appearance and abilities, but they're great kids. The whole thing has been a great blessing for us, because it's brought us into a world we never would have been involved in."

Volunteers are hooked

There are countless volunteers who work the games. Andrew Ziegler runs the game-day activities and keeps things moving.

There are numerous "buddies," such as Peck's son, Ryan, a third baseman for Birmingham Seaholm, who are assigned to each child. They help them bat, walk with them or push their wheelchairs around the bases, and help them field.

Colleen Smith, a senior at Bishop Foley, needed 10 hours of volunteer services last year for school, so she worked with the Miracle League. She ended up with 40 hours and is back for more this year -- just because.

"Every day, I just walk away smiling, because I know how happy these kids are," Smith said. "They go from not being able to hold the ball or being able to throw it or hit it over the fence to doing those things. You see how much fun they have."

Frequently, local high school teams show up to be buddies. During opening day, members of the Hillsdale College softball team were there to assist.

"You get to change a kid's life," said Ryan Peck, who has gotten to know most of the kids well. "I really like coming out here and having fun with them. You can see their faces light up. They're having a great time."

For Vic Doucette, a copy editor at Crain's Detroit Business, his work with the Miracle League as the booming-voiced public address announcer is part of a more personal journey.

Doucette, in his third season with the league, has cerebral palsy.

"If there had been a Miracle League 40 years ago, I would have been a player, but there was no such thing, so I had to do the best I could," Doucette said. "But I always wound up being the kid that nobody ever wanted on the team. If you're wearing leg braces, and you're clumsy and uncoordinated, who wants to play baseball with you?"

"When I heard about the Miracle League, I came out to watch a game, and I was totally bowled over. I realized there was no way I could not become involved with these teams."

With a radio background, Doucette was a natural as the game announcer. He is spirited and knowledgeable, belting out the names and nicknames of each child, giving the scene a big-game feel.

"Let them feel special for an hour," Doucette said. "Their brother gets to play soccer or baseball, he has Little League or youth hockey, or whatever, and they're always sitting on the

sidelines watching someone else. Why don't we give them a chance to do this and let us watch them?

"Let's make them the center of attention for a good reason. You can be the center of attention when you're disabled for a lot of bad reasons -- 'Oh, you're sick, you need to go to the doctor again. Oh, you need another surgery. Oh, you need more medicine.' Whatever. You don't get to be the center of attention because you hit a home run like your brother did in your Little League game. But you can be that center of attention here."

Father-son experience

Ernest Eckles is the coach of the Cardinals for the third season. His 8-year-old son, Brock, who is autistic but has strong motor skills and is athletically gifted, plays for his dad.

The father and son center each other. Brock's mother left the family when he was 4 months old.

"A lot of parents are too protective," Eckles said. "That's one of things I learned early on. I knew there was something wrong (with Brock), but I didn't want to accept it. One day it just hit me that the only way I could help him is to accept it. In time, I accepted it, and I started to work with him on different things. I've grown a lot through this."

Brock doesn't speak much, but his father is pleased to say he can do things on his own and can take care of every day activities, like bathing and dressing.

For them, the Miracle League is another chance to strengthen their relationship.

"It's really hard to describe (what I get out of coaching)," Eckles said. "I'll call it love. I feel a lot of love out here. These kids, they're not judged. I know at school and in the public, there are people staring at them. They come out here, they're amongst their peers. A lot of these kids would never get to play baseball. It's a good experience for the kids. And I'm really more or less about the cause. I'm not about just my kid, because as a parent, I know what other parents go through.

"You live with it. It's different than other people. I live with it. My faith leads me to believe the Lord gave us these kids for a reason. There's a reason why the Lord put these kids in our lives."

Chuck Darr admits to getting choked up when he talks about the Miracle League and what it means to his son, Alex, and family.

"I try telling other people about the league, but when you watch these kids hit the ball or run the bases or whatever, just the smiles that come on their face, it really touches you," Darr said, his eyes tearing. "So many of these kids don't get social contact, and this definitely helps that. And I think it makes them realize they can do a lot of things that other people don't think they can do."

Stephen Peck's work is not done. He wants to see Miracle Leagues all over the state of Michigan. Clearly, he has the energy, the ability and the belief to see those goals through, but he said he needs the help of communities willing to donate space for a field.

It will take time, but Peck is willing to give it. After all, he truly believes this was his calling.

"Amazing, especially when you've sacrificed like we have," Peck said, when asked how it feels to be this involved. "Although you may not be monetarily wealthy, you are so rich. I don't like being called out for doing this; I just like to do it. When you lay your head down at night, you know that you made a difference."

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