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Friday, July 2, 2004

## In this league, miracles happen

By Neal Rubin / The Detroit News



Let it be known now and forevermore that on Monday at 7:22 p.m., Terrence Cooper of the Cardinals hit the first home run in the history of the Miracle League of Michigan, that it was a grand slam and that a crowd spilling out of the stands, up the foul lines and around the green chain-link outfield fence went appropriately berserk. Terrence is a solid, friendly, mentally impaired 14-year-old from Clarkston. Unlike most of the kids at the Miracle League ballpark near the main library in Southfield, he didn't need crutches, a wheelchair or any other help to run the bases. Just like most of them, he was so eager for the league to launch that he was driving his mother batty. "He kept saying, 'Mommy, do you have my jersey ready?' " said Fiesta Cooper. "Is it washed? We've got to get there on time."

One of the great things about baseball is that at some point, even if it's just in gym class or Kyle Kosup's back yard, everyone who plays it has a shining moment. A kid catches a fly ball or bloop a single at a key moment or, like my friend Ron Knudson, gets plunked in the ribs with a pitch to bring home the winning run. Before any of that can happen, you have to play. And for a lot of kids with disabilities, grassy ball fields and muddy playgrounds and even Kyle's back yard are inaccessible. The Miracle League smooths the base paths. It provides coaches, uniforms, on-field assistance and most of all opportunity — a special cushioned synthetic diamond that looks like the real thing. The league went from grand notion to Opening Day in 11 months, a fair-sized miracle in itself. To register a child, volunteer, donate or simply marvel, go to [www.michiganmiracle.org](http://www.michiganmiracle.org) or call chairman Stephen Peck at (248)506-4604. Be prepared to go appropriately berserk. When Terrence homered, he played it cool, trotting around the bases like a pro. Meantime, says his mom, "I was yelling and screaming and jumping up and down."

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IN THEORY, it's no disgrace to use truckloads of Washington state cherries in Traverse City. The annual celebration is the National Cherry Festival, after all.

In practice, though, the festival and the cherry growers of northern and

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western Michigan rest easier when it's local pits being spit. And thanks to the best growing season in three years, the celebration will be awash in Michigan cherries when its eight-day run starts Saturday.

While the local crop in 2003 was decent, the festival was on cherry life support after brutal spring weather in 2002.

"What we feel most disheartened about when that happens is how it impacts the local growers," says media director Susan Wilcox Olson. At least the nonlocal growers did well that year, but her kids don't go to school with their kids.

Anyway, while out-of-state cherries will be used at the festival in keeping with the national theme, most of the fruit in the cherry ice cream, cherry fudge, cherry pancakes, cherry zucchini nut bread and cherry everything else will have Michigan roots.

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A FEW MORE bits of cherry education: Michigan is known as the cherry capital because it exports close to 80 percent of all tart cherries. Tarts are harvested two or three weeks after sweets and are typically used in things like frozen foods and pie fillings.

For those who get most of their cherries from cocktail skewers, you're eating Queen Anns. They're big in Leelanau County, and they're used for cherry liqueurs as well as maraschinos.

The firm, early ripening, medium-sized cherries you see at roadside stands are usually Vivas, Olson says. Pie cherries are Montmorency, sturdy with a pale yellow flesh, while Balaton cherries are "very firm with dark, juicy flesh."

I'm not completely comfortable with the idea of cherries having flesh, but I'm sure that won't stop me for long.

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A QUICK note to the driver in the baseball cap, rolling down the center lane of the southbound Lodge at 58 m.p.h. in a silver Toyota Solara convertible:

You can turn your blinker off now.

*Neal Rubin appears Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. Reach him at (313) 222-1874, [nrubin@detnews.com](mailto:nrubin@detnews.com), or 615 W. Lafayette, Detroit, MI 48226.*

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