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Friday, July 25, 2003

# Going to bat for a miracle

By Neal Rubin / The Detroit News



The other kids in his family play baseball and Briggs Parry does, too, as best he can.

When Briggs was 4 months old, a baby sitter slammed him in the chest so hard with a cordless phone that it stopped his heart. He came out of the experience with cerebral palsy, and you can imagine that's an impediment to his swing.

The condition hasn't hurt his determination, though, so while his sister and two brothers play their Little League games, he sets up his equipment next to the ballfield.

Briggs, 10, has left standing orders that his parents bring along his batting tee, a bucket of hardballs, a bucket of Wiffle balls and a small pitching machine. "Throughout the entire game," says his dad, Greg, "he plays baseball."

He sets the real balls on the tee one at a time, smacks them, limps off to retrieve them and puts them back on the tee. Or he cranks up the pitching machine and takes his rips with a plastic bat.

"If you stand back and slow-pitch to him, he will hit baseballs," says Parry, 44, a lawyer from Troy. "His swing is awkward and his gait is awkward, but he has found a system within all that to make it work."

"Our despair has always been that he's playing on the wrong side of the fence."

Soon, he could be stepping between the baselines.

This afternoon, the Miracle League of Michigan will hold its introductory press conference at the Southfield city offices. Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson will send greetings via video and someone will read a letter from Gov. Jennifer Granholm, and Briggs Parry will personally illustrate the concept:

Every kid deserves a chance to play ball.

The nonprofit Miracle League began in suburban Atlanta five years ago. The father of a girl with muscular dystrophy made some phone calls, and 34 other children showed up at a ballpark to play. A fine time was had by all, but it quickly became clear that a dirt-and-grass field was not hospitable to wheelchairs, walkers and the other accoutrements of disability.

The half-dozen Miracle Leagues around the country now use a special cushioned synthetic surface -- sort of like a grainy mouse pad -- that serves as the classic level playing field.

Accompanied by an able-bodied volunteer buddy, each kid hits, circles the bases and basically does everything the big leaguers do on TV except chew tobacco.

Southfield donated the land for the field, a prime plot just north of the

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new library. "We try to make sure we have recreation for the entire population," says parks and rec director Bill Waterhouse, but most programs are indoors.

The Miracle League field is fully accessible, all the way to the room where kids can get their tubes and dressings changed, and it's a literal ray of sunshine. "We've made some steps," he says, "but this is a *huge* step."

The program will be open to anyone who can get there. In Atlanta, says Stephen Peck of Birmingham, kids travel up to two hours to play.

Peck, 47, is the chairman and one of the two driving forces behind the Miracle League of Michigan. A former disc jockey, he went on to found a company that supplies the commercial messages you hear when you're stuck on hold.

He used to coach his son Ryan's Little League team. One of Ryan's teammates was Cooper Parry, 13, Briggs' brother, and Peck would watch Briggs smack balls nonstop for hours.

"We do all this stuff for able-bodied kids," he thought, but what about the ones who really need help? Mucking around the Internet, Peck found the Miracle League.

He pitched the idea to Tony Filippis, 86, founder of the Wright & Filippis prosthetics company in Rochester Hills, and in short order they were taking meetings with mayors.

Now he's hoping to shout "Play ball!" by fall 2004. All he needs is about \$500,000, so anyone interested in donating cash, goods or labor is invited to call (248) 506-4604 or drop by [www.michiganmiracle.org](http://www.michiganmiracle.org).

"There's still something magical about baseball," Peck says. "There's something about walking out on the field that makes you feel good" -- no matter how well you walk, or whether you can do it at all.

*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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