

BULLETIN]

League gives kids miracles

For the Miracle League of Massachusetts it's not simply a case of "if you build it, they will come." More than 105 baseball players, ages 5-18, from 38 towns around the Common-



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wealth, are already here. Six teams, 20 percent of them female players, completed the six-week fall Saturday morning season, using the Blanchard Memorial Elementary School field in Boxborough.

But the capital campaign currently underway could mean that the fall 2012 season will open with expanded enrollment at Nara Park in Acton. A fenced field with a smooth, low maintenance, specialized rubberized surface would provide easy access and mobility in a safe playing environment for team members whose physical, cognitive, behavioral or emotional disabilities require help with all aspects of the game.

In spring 2008, Lauren and Andy Richardt of Acton, with Rich and Mary Shertenlieb of Boston, co-founded the only operating Miracle League in New England with 45 players on four teams. Their non-profit, all volunteer organization, which has attracted more than 185 players from 65 towns since inception, enables everyone to play baseball in an organized non-competitive league at no cost to their families.

For Miracle League participants, who are given uniform shirts and caps, there are no winning teams and no outs. During every game, each player is given an opportunity to hit the ball and score a run. Assistance is available as needed — swinging the bat, running the bases, fielding — from an assigned buddy, like one of

this past season's 170 volunteers, primarily junior high and high school students.

"We're looking for teenagers, 12 and up, and adults to help out, too. Buddies can participate in any number of games. One game would be great. All season would be fantastic," the Richardts agree.

"We also have an announcer," Lauren adds. "Rich introduces each child, provides play-by-play and gets the crowd into the game."

"I look forward to seeing Coach Steve, Rich, and who my buddy is each week," says Owen Anketell of Hudson. Owen's hereditary spastic paraplegia affects his ability to walk without assistance. Using forearm crutches and a wheelchair, the 11-year-old has played for six seasons. His favorite part is "being up to bat, because everyone gets a chance to hit each inning."

Warren Grasso of Marlborough, father of Thomas, an autistic 11-year-old who has played for all eight seasons, comments, "We get to watch him do something he likes to do and cheer him on while he's doing it. The environment is perfect for these kids — no pressure, just go out and have fun!"

"People underestimate them all the time, assume they can't do things," says Lauren. She has listened to an intellectually disabled child make a thank you speech to 150 people at an end of season banquet with trophies, yearbooks, and photos for everyone. She has watched an 8-year-old with Spinabifida crawl around bases.

"Being a Buddy with Miracle League, you notice that the players have an endless supply of smiles," says Paul Coughlin of Marlborough, who brings his teenagers as buddies and comes alone to be a buddy when they're not available. "It's a rewarding experience to watch these athletes round third base with only joy on their faces."

"Like a lot of kids out there on the field, our son can't do some of the things other kids his age get to do, like going to dances, driving a car, playing high school sports," Robin Haley of Shrewsbury points out. "But it's thrilling to us as parents to see Justin light up when he gets attention from so many people at the Miracle League games who understand his challenges, celebrate his accomplishments, and just generally accept him for who he is and what he can do."

For more information, visit www.miracleleagueofma.com.

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