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Ready for Baseball Fun?

Challenger Baseball is for the

By Petra Stark
February 8, 2007

When 12-year-old Eddie Vestermark started playing Challenger Baseball six years ago, he was in a wheelchair hitting the ball off of the tee. Now the Herndon resident enjoys hitting a pitched ball and the thrill of running the bases with the help of one of his family members or a volunteer. This is exactly what Challenger Baseball is all about.

DESIGNED FOR physically and mentally challenged children between 5 and 18, Challenger Baseball started off as a division of Little League Baseball. Led by Coach Fitzsimmons of Fairfax, the Sully Challengers will begin its 14th season on April 13. Parents of children with any kind of disability are encouraged to sign up their children for some excitement this season.

"Challenger Baseball is for everyone regardless of disability," Coach Fitzsimmons says. "Children who have Down Syndrome play and so do children who are in wheelchairs."

"Don't come out thinking your athlete isn't good enough because there are no tryouts for our team," says Greg Updike, father of David, 12, on the Sully Challengers. "Every player gets a uniform, a spot in the line-up, a position on defense, and a license to have fun," he says.

As the father of Hailey, 13, who is physically and mentally disabled, Coach Fitzsimmons realizes how unique

Challenger Baseball is. "The opportunity for her and other disabled children to participate in the same sport that her peers and siblings do is limited," he says. But through Challenger Baseball, which is co-sponsored by the Chantilly Youth Association and the Southwest Youth Association, Fitzsimmons is able to provide his daughter and other children with the opportunity to play baseball, get together, and most of all have fun.

"Seeing these kids smile is what it is all about for me ó whether the smile results from a hit, a good play, or an interaction with a teammate."

Patty Cripe of Clifton is also thankful for Challenger Baseball, mostly because her 10-year-old daughter Meredith loves playing. "In fact, she is always reminding us 'it's Friday, it's time to go,'" she says.

More Info

Season starts: April 13, 2007

Cost: \$40.50

Web site:

www.chantillyyouth.org/baseball/News%20Minors-A/38635.html

Contact: Sean Fitzsimmons at 571-334-7066 or s.fitzp@cox.net

Location: Park across the street from Chantilly High School

Time: Fridays between 6 and 7 p.m.



Challenger Baseball's 2006 Junior Division: (from left to right) Sneyha Athreya, Edward Vestermark, Meredith Cripe, David Updike, Hailey Fitzsimmons, Keenan Tjahjana and Coach Sean Fitzsimmons.

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Laurel Hill Connection

says Cripe.

Loudoun Connection

This is because during baseball season, the Sully Challengers play every Friday night between 6 and 7 p.m. in the park across the street from Chantilly High School. It costs \$40.50 to enroll and the parents and children truly look forward to the games. "Even my other daughters who don't have any disability enjoy going and watching," says Cripe.

McLean Connection**Mount Vernon Gazette**

THE PARENTS agree that the team atmosphere is very supportive, loving and team-oriented. "The players are happy to be playing baseball," say Updike. "The best thing is that there are no egos to deal with and no one crying because they lost. In this league, everyone is a winner. Vestermark believes that is part of why Challenger Baseball is a wonderful program. "It's a great way to encourage your child to play as part of a team, meet new children and families, and allow your child to succeed," she says.

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As for what Sully Challengers players find the most rewarding, Coach Fitzsimmons says, " I can only speak for my daughter. She really enjoys the social aspect of it all and the attention and cheering she gets when playing." After a moment of reflection, Fitzsimmons said, "It helps her self-esteem."

For more information or if interested in sponsoring Challenger Baseball, call Sean Fitzsimmons at 571-334-7066.



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