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Buddy Baseball gives kids with disabilities a chance to play the sport

By Joel Poiley, Times Correspondent

A new league gives youngsters with disabilities a chance to round the bases with the help of a friend.

TEMPLE TERRACE - Arms pumping as he hustled toward first base, 13-year-old Zachary Mueller's face spelled pure joy. It was only a practice, but for Zachary, who suffers from Down syndrome, it could've been the World Series.

Thanks to Russ Oberbroeckling, Zachary and other boys and girls age 7 to 18 with psychological, social or physical disabilities have the opportunity to play baseball like their peers.

Oberbroeckling, a 47-year-old financial adviser, has started a Tampa Bay area Buddy Baseball league where the players are teamed with "buddies" who help them hit the ball or, in some cases, bat for them. Buddies push players in wheelchairs or run alongside others to the bases, directing them and urging them to keep going.

"The buddy's there to build a friendship and to just help them," Oberbroeckling said, "to help them learn how to play the game."

The program will be offered through the Temple Terrace Parks and Recreation Department. Today is the last day to register and the first game will be Oct. 17. Oberbroeckling knew of no similar league in the area.

He got the idea from a Buddy league in Rockford, Ill., where his nephew played, then learned the program's specifics from his sister, Sheri White.

"The Buddy league is more tailored to the challenge of the individual," said Oberbroeckling, who lives in Temple Terrace.

In his league, each team has about five or six players. Because players rarely hit balls into the outfield, the teams don't have outfielders. The teams practice the same day as the game - a convenience to parents who already have a lot to juggle.

Youth like Zachary will play with a trusted buddy of a similar age guiding them through the game on their own terms.

"That's where Buddy Baseball has the best of both worlds - real baseball with regular kids," Oberbroeckling said. "That makes the kids feel like they are like everyone else."

That's important to 14-year-old Joey Mendoza and his parents. The teen has ADHD and Asperger's syndrome and needs the interaction with peers, his parents said.

"Joey's never participated in sports," Michelle Mendoza said. "This will be good for him because it will help his confidence. We think if he's in a positive atmosphere with kids similar to him it might make him want to start new things."

Upon seeing what the noncompetitive league was like, Mendoza, of Seffner, was ready to give it a try.

"It sounds simple, easy enough to do," Joey said. "And I have a connection with a few of the kids here already."

Bobbi Thompson registered her 14-year-old son Trent to be a buddy because he enjoys working with kids.

"He volunteered in the Dominican last summer and wants to go back," Thompson said of her son, who attends Berkeley Preparatory School in Town 'N Country. "I'm trying to get him more involved in the community, and he loves baseball and working with kids. So this seemed like a perfect fit for him."

Oberbroeckling's daughters, Hannah, 10, and Kelsey, 12, also will be buddies.

Weeks before the league's first games, he had already heard from people throughout the county, from South Tampa to Seffner to Wesley Chapel.

"I've got parents calling and e-mailing me, thanking me," Oberbroeckling said. "There really is a need in the community for a league like this."

There is no national umbrella organization, Oberbroeckling said, although other Buddy Baseball leagues exist throughout the country, some with younger age groups. The leagues, he said, are typically parent-driven.

"We take for granted that our kids can play baseball and don't think anything of it," Oberbroeckling said. "But when parents who couldn't have that same thrill that we have now have it, that makes you feel good."

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Who's your buddy?

Registration for the

inaugural season of the Buddy Baseball league closes at 5 p.m. today at the Temple Terrace Family Recreation Complex, 6610 E Whiteway Drive.

Kids age 7 to 18 with

special needs from throughout the Tampa Bay area can participate; the cost is \$30 per player. Volunteer buddies should be age 10 to 18. (There is no cost to be a buddy.) For information,

call Russ Oberbroeckling

at (813) 416-5742 or go to buddybaseball.org.

The season lasts from

Oct. 17 to Nov. 14. (Games and practices are held on Saturdays.)

The first game is

scheduled for Oct. 17

at Lewis Elementary,

6700 Whiteway Drive,

adjacent to the Temple Terrace Family Recreation Complex. Practice is at

12:30 p.m.; games start

at 1.

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