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Program is a hit with kids

By JOYCE MCKENZIE

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TEMPLE TERRACE - Since early childhood, Holly Jackson watched in admiration as other children her age played sports. Until recently, however, it seemed unlikely she would join them.

The 13-year-old native of China and adoptive daughter of Kelly Jackson of Wesley Chapel is developmentally delayed, the result of being tied to the confines of a crib in an orphanage during her first 18 months of life.

But thanks to her mother, who in September read a story in The Tampa Tribune about Buddy Baseball - a baseball league for children with disabilities - Holly became a member of the league's HIT Hemisphere Integration Therapy Squad. It is one of six teams in the league so named by sponsor Nelson Mane, a Tampa physician who specializes in treating children with mental and physical deficiencies.

On Nov. 14, following the league's six-week fall program, Holly was among 36 players and an equal number of buddies recognized during a wrap-up party at Lewis Elementary School, adjacent to the ball field where their games were played. She, along with all the participants, received a trophy.

"My daughter has always wanted a trophy, and today she is getting a trophy," Kelly Jackson said.

The program, a brainchild of Temple Terrace resident Russ Oberbroeckling, is patterned after a successful league that his sister, Sheri White, started a few years ago in Rockford, Ill.

"I was very happy on how the season turned out," said Oberbroeckling, the father of two girls, Hannah, 10, and Kelsey, 12, who along with other members of the Temple Terrace Leaguerettes served as one-on-one buddies to the players.

The city's parks and recreation department helped organize the site, students from Tampa Bay Tech's Key Club jumped on board each Saturday to man the concession stand, and program participants represented 40 schools from throughout the county - a number Oberbroeckling said he never imagined the first year.

"I figured we'd have 20 kids and four teams and we'd have a small little party afterwards," Oberbroeckling said just prior to the end-of-the-season party that drew about 200 people and the support of area businesses that donated pizza, barbecue, soft drinks, and tables and chairs.

Zachary Mueller, 14, a Greco Middle student with Down syndrome, was seated beside his buddy, Daniel Martin, 14, from Adams Middle .

"It's cool," said Zachary, the son of Kim and David Mueller, as he beamed with excitement at the sight of his trophy.

Martin agreed, saying, "It's been fun for me, and it's been fun to be with him."

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Judging by the nonstop smile on his face, it was obvious to Suzanne and Robert Gueterman that their only child, Stephen, 7, a student at Carrollwood Elementary School who has cerebral palsy, also was thrilled to be part of the celebration.

"This has given Stephen a chance to play with other children with disabilities, and he has really excelled with it," Suzanne said.

His dad was grateful for the camaraderie his son developed with teammates

"He will definitely be back," Robert said.

From a survey given to parents, it appears Stephen will have plenty of company. It shows 100 percent of the children who participated this season plan to return early next year when the league resumes play.

Visit www.buddybaseball.org for parents' comments and details about the program.

Reporter Joyce McKenzie can be reached at (813) 731-8026.