



America's Favorite Pastime

Now Available for All to Enjoy

Katy Challenger Baseball Offers Special Fun for Special Kids

Baseball is fondly nicknamed America's favorite pastime, but for children with special needs, enjoyment of the popular game may be limited to cheering along in the stands. Yet this year, more than 100 Katy and West Houston special needs kids were able to participate in the beloved sport thanks to the unique Challenger Baseball program, offered through Katy American Little League (KALL). Challenger Baseball is a special division of Little League Baseball which formed in 1989 to provide traditional baseball fun to children with physical or mental disabilities. Since that time, Challenger Baseball has seen tremendous growth and today serves more than 22,000 kids.

Challenger Players Enjoy their Sport Without the Stress

Challenger players wear the same uniforms, use the same equipment, and enjoy the same baseball thrills as other Little League participants—but in a low-stress, non-competitive environment where everyone's primary concern is simply to have a good time. "There's such a relaxed, compassionate, and supportive atmosphere," says Katy Challenger parent, Sammy Grooms. "Everyone cheers for everyone," adds his wife, Maria.

But don't try telling Challenger players it's a non-competitive league. Some of these kids feel that they're being scouted for the next Major League draft," laughs Challenger parent and coach Noe Martinez. "Of course, others just want to have fun. Either way, they all develop a friendship and kinship with each other every time they play."

Hayley readies her glove for the next fly ball



There's such a relaxed, compassionate,
and supportive atmosphere

—Sammy Grooms, Challenger Parent.

The Special Challenges of Challenger Baseball

While Challenger Baseball offers a relaxed environment for the players and parents, the program also requires dedicated community support. Katy American Little League provides the facilities and equipment for Katy Challenger Baseball, but tremendous local assistance from sponsors, donors, volunteers, and Challenger Buddies is required to ensure the program's success.

"We'll have more than 100 Challenger players each weekend during the season," explains Stallcop. "We need lots of local support to help these kids enjoy the game to the fullest."

Any help is greatly appreciated, but corporate sponsors and service organizations that are willing and able to commit an hour each weekend to the program are especially needed. "There are so many special needs kids out there who need this kind of program," explains Smola. "Challenger Baseball doesn't have the national presence or visibility that some causes enjoy, but I'd do anything for these kids."

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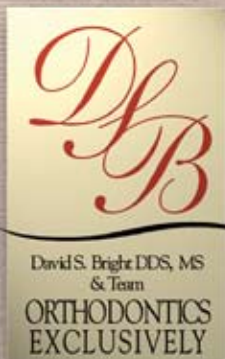
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Jenna prepares to knock one out of the park

When these kids are at Challenger, everything that happens on the field is fun and natural. It's a chance for these parents to relax and to enjoy their kids for who they are and not worry about trying to explain what they're not."

—Meg Smola, KALL Challenger Coordinator

Challenger Buddies

Another unique aspect of Challenger Baseball is the use of volunteer buddies for all participants. Challenger Buddies assist the players on the field as needed and allow each player to be as independent as possible, providing assistance when needed. For many families, Challenger provides a rare opportunity to forget about disabilities for a few minutes and focus instead on the simple joy of kids playing baseball.

"When these kids are at Challenger, everything that happens on the field is fun and natural," says KALL Challenger Coordinator Meg Smola. "It's a chance for these parents to relax and to enjoy their kids for who they are and not worry about trying to explain what they're not."



Lucas dashes to first base



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Baseball Helps Players' Self Esteem Soar

Smola became involved with the Katy Challenger program when it first organized while she was looking for baseball opportunities for her son. "Before we joined Challenger, my son would not throw overhand," she says. "He was scared of doing it wrong somehow. Like most of these kids, he's harder on himself than anyone else is. But the first time he came and played Challenger, he immediately started throwing overhand and playing with confidence. It was amazing to see."

Wynne Stallcop, President of Katy American Little League, sees Challenger as an integral part of KALL's charter to the community. "Growing up, baseball was always my out," Stallcop explains. "I hope we can provide all our players a place to get away. Somewhere in the sun, the field, the ball, and friends having fun—the great escape. These kids, and all kids, need that."



When talking to Challenger parents, coaches, and players, it's easy to see why so many people are willing to work so hard to make the program succeed. "Just look at the faces of these kids as they come up to

bat, hit a ball, and slide into home plate," explains Martinez. "Those smiles alone make the program worthwhile to me."

Brett Nicholson lives in Katy and is the father of five children.



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