

CHALLENGER BASEBALL

Bridgewater Community Little League

Established 2001

The Challenger Division of Bridgewater Community Little League held its first game on Saturday, April 28, 2001. The ceremonial first pitch was thrown by Challenger player Kevin Rublee in an opening ceremony shared with the minor league baseball and softball divisions. In Challenger's 2001 inaugural season, there were 24 athletes on two teams. The late Lawson Marshall of the *Shenandoah Journal* attended the first game and his story the following week featured the headline, "A League Where Smiles Count More Than Runs." Mr. Marshall's words defined the program's identity and established its ongoing challenge.

Challenger is a division of Little League Baseball, Incorporated, that began in 1989. It serves players with physical or mental conditions that prevent safe participation in Little League's other programs. Play is structured to allow all players to participate as they are able. Rules are modified and the focus is always on having fun while learning the game of baseball. No score is kept, each player bats every inning, and everyone plays the entire game. Runners advance one base at a time, creating the exciting feature of a "grand slam" to end each Challenger inning.

The inception of the Challenger Division in Bridgewater enabled the League to serve a population of children in this area who had never before had the opportunity to play Little League Baseball. Their joy in being able to participate was obvious. A mechanical batting device was designed and built by a local engineer specifically for Bridgewater's Challenger Program. The device enabled athletes with limited arm and hand strength to hit a baseball off a tee by pulling a handle that triggered the release of a bat. This device has been refined since the opening season and continues to provide children independence in swinging a bat. The special efforts of the engineer were justified beyond measure when the parent of an athlete asked in disbelief, "You mean he built this just for us?"

Challenger athletes are assigned buddies who work with them throughout the season. The buddy's role is to serve as protector, helper, cheerleader, and friend. Bridgewater's buddies are dedicated individuals whose contribution is critical to the success of the program. Buddies must be at least 14 years of age. They are players in other League divisions, volunteers from the community, local teachers, university students, and family members. Some very special relationships have developed as a result of these player-buddy pairings. There are often requests for the same buddy season after season; some Challenger athletes eagerly support buddies at their sporting events; and one young athlete served as ring bearer in his Challenger buddy's wedding.

From the beginning of Bridgewater's Challenger Program, there has been a commitment to provide its athletes as many opportunities as possible to feel successful and to showcase their abilities. One Challenger player confidently compared his skills to those of a major leaguer when he expressed, "I'm not as good as Ken Griffey, Jr., but WHO is?" In order to support and encourage the athletes in the program, the services of many dedicated volunteers are necessary. A physical therapist assists with training buddies and advises coaches of ways players can be more independent. An announcer introduces players at the beginning of each game and provides play-by-play descriptions that are full of personal recognition and encouragement for each athlete. The Challenger umpire's role, although very different from a traditional umpire, is no less important. Bridgewater's umpires constantly monitor safety conditions, assist batters, and provide an incredible number of "SAFE" calls and "high fives."

Support from the League, civic and church organizations, businesses, and individuals has enabled Bridgewater's Challenger Division to provide its athletes with a quality program. Each player receives a full uniform, complete with a major-league replica jersey with his or her name on the back. Individual trophies are given at the end of the season in a special ceremony. These awards are particularly precious to children who have never received this kind of recognition. When given his trophy at the end of the 2002 season, a new Challenger player cradled it close to his chest and told his coach, "You must be so proud of me."

Some special events made possible by funds from sponsors include picnics and trips to baseball games. Participation in 2002 jumped to 38 players and at the end of that season, athletes and their families shared in a chartered bus trip to a Salem Avalanche game. They enjoyed a ballpark picnic and the athletes were introduced on the field with the minor league teams. A great thrill for the players was to see "Welcome Bridgewater Challenger Division" on the large scoreboard in center field.

Athletic programs at Bridgewater College and James Madison University have provided ongoing support to the Challenger division. BC officials have consistently made indoor practice facilities available. Baseball and softball teams, as well as other student volunteers from the College have assisted with preseason practices, ensuring that all players have individual attention during their important first experiences with Challenger. Since the program began in 2001, JMU has annually hosted the Challenger teams for a game with the Duke players serving as buddies. This opportunity to play in a stadium (with astroturf!) has been thrilling for many of the athletes.

Sponsor and League support have enabled facility improvements that provide a safer playing environment for Challenger athletes. Prior to the 2004 season, dugouts were rebuilt on ground level, making them accessible to all players. This project was completed through the volunteer efforts of a few dedicated individuals. Plans for the coming year include resurfacing around the dugouts to allow for greater player mobility.

The 2003 season, like many in our area, was shortened due to multiple rainouts. However, there was beautiful weather for the finale—a picnic at Hillandale Park for all athletes and families (with homemade ice cream provided by some special Challenger supporters) and an opportunity to be honored guests of the Harrisonburg Turks.

Bridgewater's Challenger Division began its fourth season at Oakdale Park on Saturday, April 24, 2004 with a ceremonial first pitch thrown by Nick Bennett, a three-year Challenger veteran. The division has grown to include 44 athletes on four teams. These young people come from throughout Rockingham County and the city of Harrisonburg. An increased number of players at the beginning of the 2003 season led to the decision to divide into two age groups, a structure that remains intact for the current year. The focus of Challenger in Bridgewater continues to be on the abilities of its athletes and the joy that can be shared through the game of baseball. After hitting a ball to the outfield and circling the bases amid cheers from family and fans, an athlete struggled slightly to match his coach's "high five", then said with a dancing smile, "On your team, I'm good." THIS is Challenger's mission.

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4/27/04