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Jessica Slash: Amazing All Stars shine in Challenger Division of Huntington Little League

Photo courtesy of Bradley Helton

The League 3 Challenger Division was started this season and provides and opportunity for those with special needs to play baseball.

September 18, 2011 @ 12:00 AM
The Herald-Dispatch

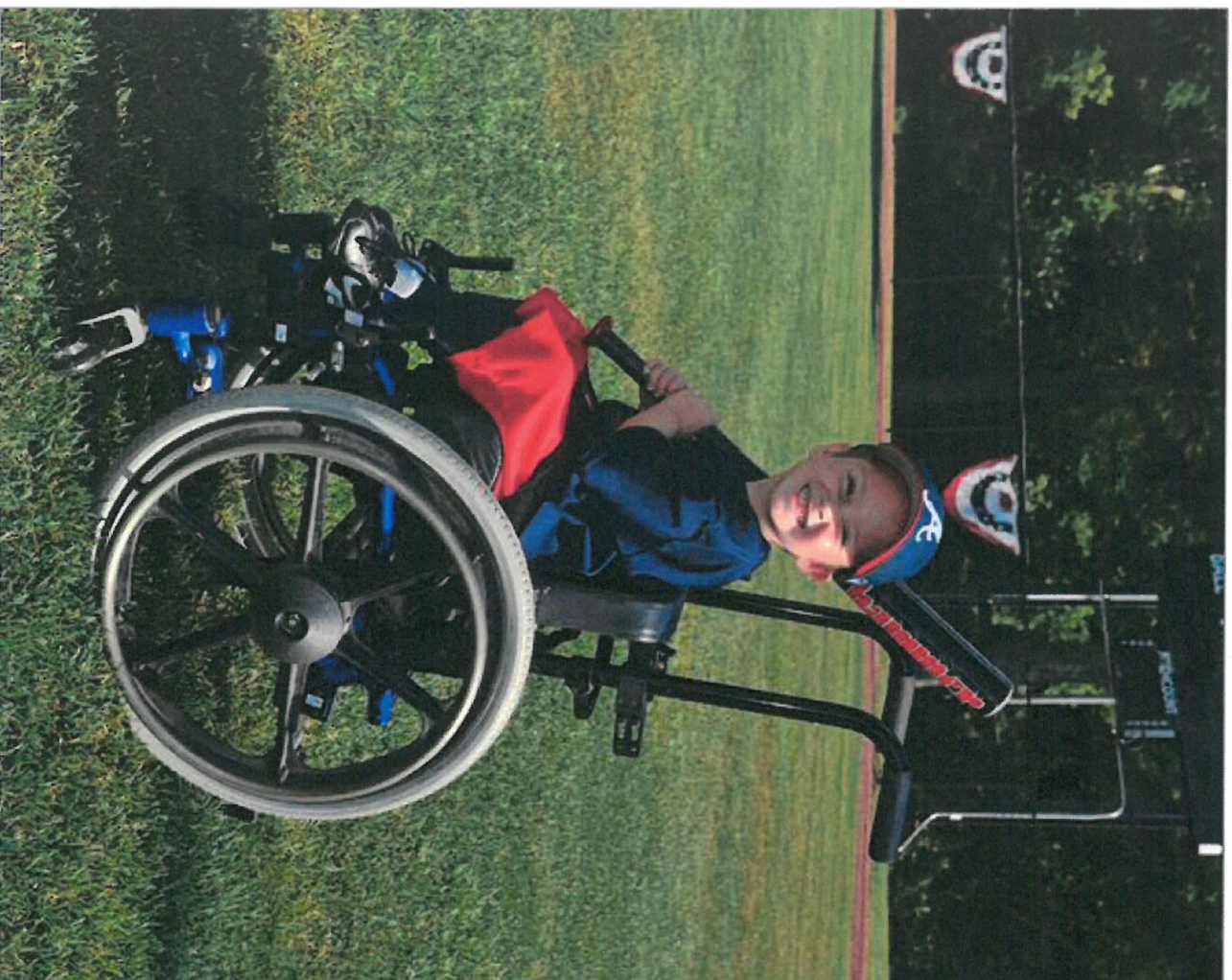
Huntington Little League 3 participated in Ryee's Rally/One 4 All Disability Expo, a resource fair for individuals with special health care needs in 2010 in order to begin a Challenger Division of baseball. Todd Shell had obtained information pertaining to Challenger Divisions and spoke to my husband and me who have two children with special needs, about coordinating a team through Huntington Little League 3.

So, what is a Challenger League/Division of baseball? It is a league for individuals who have special needs, regardless of their diagnosis or prognosis. This league provides children and adults with an opportunity to participate in a sport, on a team, the same as other individuals within the community. This league seeks to teach these individuals about sportsmanship, team work, dedication, and acceptance. Not to mention that we strive to teach them the fundamentals of the game.

In 2010, Little League 3 Challenger Division developed, and there were approximately 18 to 22 players on the roster, who were not only ecstatic about playing ball and learning about the game of baseball, but they also truly enjoyed being with their peers. The 2011 roster accounted for 32 players, five coaches, and several volunteers. This division has allowed the families and the players to have a network of friends, families, and supporters who accept them for their abilities rather than seeing them for their disabilities and limitations.

As we are ending one season and beginning to plan May 2012, we reflect on the moments that took our breath away.

These players are our Amazing All Stars. As the coordinators of the Challenger League, my husband and I think that the league is



important because it allows our children and others who have disabilities or limitations to participate in a sport within their own community with their own peers. This league provides these individuals to be a part of a team-to have people cheering for them and rooting them on. Many of these individuals would not have this experience if it weren't for Challenger League. It is as though we have bonded to the point that we have become our own network of support; we all have an understanding of what one another experiences.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays we let go of struggles and worries, instead we are on the field watching these players, our Amazing All Stars, continue conquering barriers that they face daily; smiling as they hit the ball, catch the ball, and even make a run. To all of us – it's amazing, it's uplifting, and most of all it's a blessing! These individuals deserve this opportunity, and we want to thank everyone from League 3 and from the Challenger Division, especially the players and our supporters, for making this experience possible.

On Aug. 25, we held our trophy ceremony at Gino's Pub where families were asked to describe what the Challenger Division means to them and their family. The responses were astounding and breathtaking.

"This league has helped my son so much in so many ways. He can be himself and no one treats him like he's the odd kid. When you have a child with 'any' type of a special need, they just want to be treated like everyone else. And with this league, my son is treated just like that. So I am and will always be thankful for that with them. And I look forward to doing this all over again next year! Thank you" – Debbie.

"Challenger League gives my 19 year old daughter a place where she can play baseball and socialize with her peers. This league

provides her with a place that makes those things possible" -- Valerie Watson.

"I think it was a great experience for not only kids with disabilities but for everyone. I notice the expressions on those children's faces and it almost brought me to tears. I think it's beautiful. God Bless you all for doing this" -- Shirley Wilson.

"This League has meant the world to my husband and I. We get to see these kids week after week have a smiling face, laugh, and that is what's important. The league is like another family where these kids are loved so much by everyone. These kids are kids and get to be kids-that's what's important" -- Kellisa and Jerry Dowdy.

"It gave my grandson a great summer. Challenger League gave Kole something to look forward to twice a week. He got to stay up on his friends and loved just being on the field. Nothing has come close to what my grandson gets from playing and being accepted for just being himself. He loves it. We will see you in May 2012, with our smiles on. A big thanks to everyone that helps this year was great" -- Jan Harmon.

"The Challenger League is the best thing that has happened for my son with a disability. We appreciate League 3 and Charlie and Jessie Slash so much. I can't wait until May 2012" -- Brian and Amy Frazier.

"I really enjoy seeing the smiles on my son's face. He is 18 years old and enjoys playing with League 3" -- Cinda Price.

"The league meant a lot to me. There were so many kids this year. I didn't know them all but it did not matter because they were all special to me" -- Desiree Wilson (12-year-old volunteer).

"I like baseball and the kids like being on a team. It is very fun for them and us too" -- Valerie Smith.

"I enjoy watching baseball, and this is a fun bunch of kids playing America's game. Its great seeing them have so much fun" -- John Taylor.

"League 3 Challenger Division has been a blessing in our lives. Our sons, Cody Nelson and Brad Payton, have played the last 2 years and are already looking forward to the upcoming 2012 season. This is a league that accepts children as they are regardless of their handicaps or disabilities. And all of the team members are treated equally-wheelchairs, leg braces, or whatever the diagnosis a player may have; they all come and play together as an awesome team" -- Clarence and Misty Payton.

"To the Challenger League for all it has done for the kids with and without disabilities...it has been a wonderful experience seeing the smiles on our kids' faces. Looking forward to next year. Thanks so much" -- Susan Adkins.

"This league is the best thing I could have ever been a part of. To see the smiles on the kids' faces was the greatest and most joyful

sight in the world. I hope to be a part of these kids' experiences every year to come. May God watch and bless every one of them" - Adam Dowdy.

"There is no way that I could explain the joy that League 3 Challenger Division has brought to our family. My son may not always get to be like other kids, but league 3 allows him to use his wheelchair to play baseball with everyone else. The smile on Bryson's face is priceless to me. Huntington should be proud to have such an organization exist in our community. These children deserve the chance to play and feel welcome. League 3 gives the kids that chance. Thank you League 3 and all who donate to the league!" -- Emily Dowdy.

"Challenger League has been such a blessing to us. Our daughter, Lana, has never been included in sports because of her physical limitations. But now, she is part of a team that cheers for her regardless of how she plays. She feels included and it has greatly improved her self esteem. She has had a chance to learn how to play baseball when she wouldn't have on a regular team. Her sister, Emilee, has also had the opportunity to learn how to help others by being a volunteer on the team. Her father, James, enjoys coaching also. He loves helping ALL the players learn how to play! Our whole family has benefited from it. We are thankful for LL3 and for Charlie and Jessie Slash. If it wasn't for them, this wouldn't be possible!" -- Jennifer Aliff.

"The lasting impression of each catch, hit, smile, frown, run, and fall provided an unknowing reality to the impact that the Huntington League 3 Challenger Division had on each child. As a volunteer you find yourself stepping back and realizing that each individual on the field is presented with an opportunity, which may not have been promised. The entire "series" was amazing and it made me feel truly blessed to have taken part in such a phenomenal experience!" -- Jolaina "Jo" Russell.

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Jessica Slash and her husband Charlie coordinate the League 3 Challenger Division.

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