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Reflections . . .

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The Boys and Girls of Summer

by Judy Horton

Recently I realized—much to my surprise—that a regular highlight of my week is attending my daughter Kelly's Challenger League baseball game. These games won't be written up on the sports page, or reported on the evening news, but they have a charm all their own.

A few hours after Kelly's birth 13 years ago, and after we had been told that she had Down syndrome, our pediatrician came sweeping into the room holding our bald, red-faced, little bundle and said, "You're going to have a terrific time with this kid! She's healthy and strong. It's hard now, but you'll see, you're going to have a terrific time! These are great kids."

That young doctor was right. And given the great blessings of a healthy heart and sturdy body, we have always tried to involve Kelly in activities and sports. One of her favorites is baseball, and she's a decent hitter and a good sport.

This was not always so.

When friends Pamela and Johnny Sanford told us a few years ago that a Challenger League team was forming in Taylor, we were excited, and showed up eager for the first practice. Pamela agreed to be the coach, assisted by Johnny and whoever else she could dragoon into service.

Our ragtag team exhibited a wide variety of physical and mental disabilities, and what Pamela had to work with was not encouraging. Our first practice gave scant reason for hope. Whenever Brent, a little guy with Downs, got the ball, he would promptly run away and hunker down. All activity would cease as negotiations opened.

Pamela: "Brent, you're supposed to throw the ball to Leo at first base. See Leo over there? Throw him the ball."

Brent, unconvinced, would eye Leo warily and peek at the ball. Finally deciding that possession was indeed nine-tenths of the law, he would stuff it under his armpit and turn his back to the coach. When Pamela got nowhere, Johnny would amble onto the field. "Okay, son, it's time to let go of the ball. You've gotta throw it over there to Leo. He's at first base. That's how we play the game. We don't keep the ball. Come on, son."

Eventually play got underway again. But Kelly had gotten confused and frustrated, sitting down on the turf in tears—as Robert, Pamela and Johnny's boy, would fling the ball randomly into the street. Yikes! But Pamela and Johnny persevered, week after week.

And sitting in the stands the other day I realized how far our team has come. Kelly now makes it through every game without breaking down, and she's developed into a solid hitter. Brent no longer holds the ball hostage, and Robert can follow the game enough to throw to the right person at least sometimes.

And all that work paid off in a game last week.

It was midway through the second inning and Robert (whose strength is impressive but whose sense of direction is not), had stopped a line drive. He wagged his great, carrot topped head as he scooped up the ball and threw it straight to Brent on the pitcher's mound. Brent—miracle of miracles!—caught the ball right in his glove. Stunned, he paused to behold this marvel. Time went by. Then realization dawned, and a smile spread

from ear to ear. In the stands we fans went wild with joy. The fans in the opposite stand cheered right along with us. (This is a real plus of Challenger League: we get to cheer a lot—for our kids and for the other team's kids too.)

Brent held his arms aloft in victory to show the ball nestled in the pocket of his glove, turning slowly to give everyone a full view, milking the moment for all it was worth. The visitor's coach was standing nearby, and Brent threw his arms around him. The coach lifted the skinny kid up and spun him around, as high five's crashed on upheld palms all over the field.

We laughed, we cried, and it was then I realized that love of baseball had finally taken root in my heart. Not just any old baseball, but this very special brand.

Later, as the teams ambled off to get their free after-game refreshments, an exhausted Pamela picked through the bats and balls and helmets and tried to figure out the schedule for the coming week. "Why do I do this?" she wondered aloud. I put my arm around her and said, "Come now: you know why you do it." "Because nobody else will do it?" she opined.

Well, true enough, but obviously not the only reason. Because for all us parents, our hearts are out there on the line. We are champions at rejoicing over the small stuff—as befits parents who started out not knowing if their kids would even walk, much less play baseball.

Some people want to do away with "special" divisions of sports, in favor of integrating disabled and non-disabled players. "Oh, no," I think when I hear this, because my husband Jerry and I agree that much of Kelly's growth has come about through involvement in Special Olympics and Challenger baseball. She's developed skills, endurance, fitness, and independence, and learned to be a member of a team. Would she learn these lessons as the weakest member of a regular team? I doubt it.

"Please," I want to tell them: "Leave us our victories. We have our own field of dreams."

Meanwhile, there's still time to catch a Challenger game before the season's over. They run, they swing, sometimes they hit, less frequently they catch. But they all play like champions in my book and I suggest you go. You won't be sorry you did.

"Play ball!"

Mission

Down Home Ranch seeks to be faithful to the Christian mission to provide for those in need. Its mission is to build a rural, self-reliant community for adults with disabilities such as mental retardation—offering training, housing, recreation, and dignified employment, as well as opportunities for growth in mind, body, and spirit