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A program for special athletes

Township starts sports program for special needs children

By **AUBRIE GEORGE**
The Medford Sun

Following a successful program this winter, the Medford Recreation Department has launched a spring sports program for children with special needs.

The spring program, which offers Medford children with a wide range of physical, intellectual and emotional challenges the opportunity to play whiffle ball each week, is the second to launch in a series of programs called Sports for Special Athletes.

Born out of Camp PLAY – the department's summer camp for special need children – the sports program gives special needs children the opportunity to play an in-season sport in an informal, fun and safe environment.

Members of the department

say the program offers children with special needs, who cannot or don't feel comfortable participating in organized athletic activities with able-bodied children, a chance to play an organized sport.

Sports for Special Athletes began with basketball this winter.

"We're following the very same format as the winter program," said Jo Kuchera, the program's director. "We learned a lot from it and found the right mix of things that work for this program."

The program incorporates the use of "buddies" – volunteers who work with the special needs athletes. Buddies range from middle school- to high school-aged children.

Kuchera said many of the buddies who worked with the pro-

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gram this winter are returning this spring. This season, more than 20 buddies have worked with the program.

"A lot of them came back because they enjoyed the experience so much in the winter," Kuchera said.

"And a lot of them have been re-assigned to the same child so that there is continuity for the children from program to program."

This season, the program has benefitted from a donation from Big League Dreams – a family entertainment center on Fostertown Road that features indoor fields modeled after famous major league ballparks.

The owners of Big League Dreams – Pat Douglas, Steve Naylor and Stephanie Passaro – have offered use of the facilities and equipment at no charge.

"It's working out really well," Kuchera said of the partnership. "The kids are really fascinated by the location and are enjoying the opportunity to use the fields to play whiffle ball."

Naylor said Big League Dreams appreciates the opportunity to work with Medford Township as well as help local children.

"It's all about the kids," Naylor said. "That's what we do here. We want the kids to have as much fun as possible and experience the game of baseball, and we have a safe environment for them."

Naylor said the company has enjoyed building a relationship with the recreation department as well as the township.

"These are our customers and the people who are going to come to us in the future, so we want to do anything we can to help out," he said.

On Monday nights, Big League

Dreams opens its facilities to the 25 children who participate in the program and also provides staff to help coach the children.

Children are taught skills through various drills and are given the opportunity to pitch, catch and hit on the indoor fields.

Big League Dreams also gave each child in the program a T-shirt to remember their involvement.

Kuchera said the program is appreciative of the generosity from Big League Dreams and is overwhelmed by the willingness of local teens who volunteer their time to help out.

"We have had no problem finding buddies, they're very enthu-

siastic," Kuchera said. "They're finding it such a good experience and they're happy to come back each week. They've developed a nice relationship with the children they've been working with."

Kuchera said the department hopes to continue expanding the program so that a sport is offered every season.

Currently, the department is gearing up for a similar tennis program, which is set to launch this June.

For more information about the Sports for Special Athletes programs contact the Medford Recreation Department at (609) 654-2512.