

Challenger will help kids with disabilities play baseball

By Bill Rea

Baseball is a game that can be fun for all, and not just for the more athletic out there.

Bolton Baseball is in the process of setting up a Challenger program, that will provide an opportunity for children with cognitive or physical disabilities to have fun playing the game, and being part of a team.

Bolton Baseball hosted well-attended meeting recently to explain points of the program.

"The reaction for the program has been tremendous," commented Bolton Baseball President Michael Ortolan.

He said baseball in Bolton has been running for 49 years. It now takes in the town of Caledon. The Bolton organization is part of the York-Simcoe Baseball Association.

The local program has been experiencing lots of growth over the years, partly due to the local population increase, as well as the popularity of the Toronto Blue Jays.

"We've tried to eb and flow with them," he commented.

Ortolan said they are hoping to have a Challenger Division ready to go for the 2017 ball season.

He added they learned about the program from a link on the Baseball Ontario website. Always looking for ways to improve the local program, Ortolan said he went to that website and found himself on "a trip down Memory Lane." He recalled growing up with a kid who had Down syndrome.

Baseball Ontario was able to offer some tips on how to set up a program, and Ortolan said he put together a proposal that the Bolton board approved unanimously.

Challenger sees games played in a fun, safe setting. There is no keeping of score. Each player is assigned a "buddy" to help them out during the game, whether it's pushing wheelchairs around the bases, helping them hold the bat, etc.

Cindy Rossignoli, grassroots coordinator for Baseball Ontario, said the Challenger program lets youngsters with difficulties take part in a league, complete with uniforms. It lets them have fun and gives them the chance to apply some basic fundamentals of the game. She explained the program started around 1988, with the first Canadian version starting in '89 in Calgary. Baseball Canada was involved by 2012, and it's been set up in local communities throughout Ontario. The main focus has been on youngsters aged four to 18, and Rossignoli said senior divisions for players aged 17 and older are starting up.

The effort has been to show communities these kids can play ball.

"Once you do it, you don't ever want to look back," she said.

Another advantage she cited is it gives people the chance to give back to the community by being buddies. Having someone else watching the player gives parents the chance to sit back and watch their child have fun.

She stressed the games are not competitive. "Everybody bats," she said, adding there are no strikes, balls or outs. Everyone bats until they hit the ball, and everyone's safe on base.

Rossignoli added conditions are adaptable, without strict parameters. "We want to keep it as basic as possible," she said.

The main requirements for a challenger program include playing fields that are accessible and fairly well drained. The diamonds don't have to be big.

There will also have to be record checks for coaches and buddies, but Rossignoli said that can be done through the local police station.

There are financial supports and grants available too.

As well, Baseball Canada runs a jamboree in June, complete with going to a Blue Jays' game.

Catherine McLean, a recreation supervisor with the Town of Caledon's Parks and Recreation Department, said there was a meeting in the fall with the local baseball organization to discuss the new program.

"Immediately, we jumped all over it," she said.

She said the Town is looking at providing diamonds, and there have been sketches done at a site on the Bolton Camp property. That land is owned by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), and Town staff is working on it.

Ortolan said the Challenger program will not be restricted to youngsters in Caledon. Kids from surrounding communities can be accommodated too. He said they've been hearing expressions of interest from as far north as Barrie.

The plan is to have it open to "anyone who can get here," he said.

Ortolan said they are working on recruiting volunteers and buddies, and they will be engaging students at local schools, church groups, etc. He added they are working on a budget, as well as approaching local businesses to help supply uniforms.

They are hoping to have 80 kids lined up the first year; enough for eight teams. Ortolan didn't think that would be hard to do.

Support is already coming from outside the community.

Tottenham resident Tim Schrank, representing a group called Help the Kids Play, said they have had a meeting and are ready to support the Challenger effort.