

Challengers' baseball diamond a big hit

By Constance Scrafield

It was a special afternoon for some special kids thanks to the Blue Jays Care Foundation, the Bolton Braves Baseball Association, the Caledon Challenger Program and Toronto and Region Conservation Area (TRCA).

The Grand Opening this week of the Caledon Challenger Baseball Diamond took place on Tuesday evening. This is the new, fully accessible baseball diamond, in Bolton Camp, for the Caledon and Brampton Challenger Baseball Teams, plus any other Challenger teams that would like to come.

These are the real deal for kids with cognitive and physical disabilities from ages four to 18, but these ages are really only guidelines, as Michael Ortolan, president of the Bolton Braves Baseball Association, commented.

?Whoever wants to play should come and play.?

The players wear uniforms of shirts and caps; the dugouts are specially made wider to accommodate wheelchairs and they have multiple exits.

The ball stands on a tee waiting for the mighty blow of each youngster. No matter what happens to the ball, a run is scored. There is no scorekeeping, just the joy and fun of playing the games.

The bleachers are filled with the family and fans and, on Tuesday, there was even a chorus of teenage girls dressed the same and dancing in unison, cheerleaders to cheer the play along.

Each of the young people were there in full uniform and accompanied by a ?buddy.?. The buddies come from many sources: the high schools, family of the organizers and friends, a mother and daughter team, each caring for a player. One player, one buddy, and, as far as possible, always the same buddy.

Built in just two years from conception to fact, the Challenger Baseball Diamond is the result of complete agreement on the part of the participating groups.

Not often does a town council agree unanimously on any given proposal but the construction of this diamond broke that mould.

The Jays Care Foundation, the focus of which is to encourage Challenger Baseball, gave \$150,000 toward the new diamond with the town taking on the rest. The need for such a diamond was originally brought to the attention of the town by the Bolton Braves.

?First was to draw attention to the need,? said Mr. Ortolan, ?second was to find someone to help us.?

To get the sense of the occasion we took a walk through the first dugout to greet some of the assembled players, waiting for the festivities ? and the game! - to begin. There was plenty of excitement in the ranks. A couple of lads in chairs took time to talk to us with their buddies. Dylan plays shortstop, so he let us know, and Presley plays the field. Their buddies, Deanna, Shane and Braideen all assured us this is the most fun.

Crossing the field to the other dugout, we met the day's official guests: Caledon Mayor Allan Thompson, Caledon Dufferin MPP Sylvia Jones and John MacKenzie, CEO of the TRCA. They were as pleased about the new Challenger Baseball Diamond as the young people benefitting from this wonderful innovation.

On the other side of the field, was the Caledon Challenger Team, also eager to begin.

Said Anna, one of the buddies, 'It's so great for the buddies just to see how much they are enjoying themselves and not feeling depressed.'

First, a few words from each of the visiting officials, each expressing their pleasure at seeing the project completed and their promise for further development of Bolton Camp.

John MacKenzie called the Challenger Baseball Diamond, 'Caledon's Field of Dreams.' He said three years ago there were 400 kids with disabilities playing baseball in the catchment area of the TRCA.

'Now there are 6,000,' he said. 'We're working hard to make progress for upgrading the facilities here.'

As well as more accessible play areas in the camp, there are ambitious plans for the beautifying and increased use of Bolton Camp overall with seasonal activities and attractions, such as a theatre, pop-up retail shops and bike and hike camps, yoga and more.

'At first, we thought of the piece of land at the top of the North Hill in Bolton,' said Mr. Ortolan. 'Then, the senior project manager of the Bolton Camp suggested there was a space here. We put the diamond right on top of a lacrosse field. Seems no one was playing lacrosse anymore.'

For all of them who have worked so hard to bring this together, it is seeing the smiles on the faces of the kids and realizing their own potential in sport.

'They've playing here since June in its first season,' Mr. Ortolan informed us. 'This was a community need. Other regions have started to create Challenger teams. Anyone can come here . . . Everybody has the right to play.'

