

Their Field of Dreams

Buddy Ball gives all children the chance to participate in and enjoy one of America's favorite pastimes.

By Kevin Fritz

Call it a modern-day Field of Dreams. When the final transformation is complete, with its finely manicured, state-of-the-art wheelchair accessible grounds and rubber-based infield with painted baselines, it appears the magic of bringing baseball to all children in Seminole County just got a little easier.

The new field, built specifically to accommodate physically and mentally disabled children, is the product of tireless volunteers dedicated to finding a permanent home for a form of baseball called Buddy Ball. Thanks to fundraisers, private donations and the city of **Altamonte Springs** for donating the land for the field, Eastmonte Park is playing host to the Central Florida Bambino Buddy Ball League, which teams up challenged children with older children called buddies who help them hit, throw and move around the bases.

With the first year of Buddy Ball under its belt, the league opens its sophomore season this month at Eastmonte Park, located just south of state road 436 on Magnolia Drive. **Sarah Reece**, league president and Altamonte Springs City Commissioner, says that last year players and volunteers had to travel throughout Central Florida in search of a suitable place for the kids to play. The transformation of the field at Eastmonte Park was paramount to allowing the children to fully experience the joys of playing baseball.

And while the rules of the game may be tweaked depending on the handicaps, no one notices. And no one seems to care. "It is such a unique program," she says. "These kids get a lot out of it, and the parents are getting a lot out of it too."

Reece says Buddy Ball is associated with Babe Ruth Baseball from District 12 and consists of volunteers,

parents of children with disabilities, parents of the baseball players, and the ballplayers themselves. A volunteer buddy from the Babe Ruth League is assigned to each child on a rotating basis for every game, offering whatever assistance the challenged child may need. Sometimes it's pushing a wheelchair, helping with a walker, or just letting the child make a play on his or her own. Reece says a schedule for volunteers is made in advance so there are plenty of buddies for the children, and she is humbled by the ballplayers who take their time to help these kids.

"These are teenagers," she notes, "and there hasn't been a game yet when someone didn't come up to me afterward and say 'when can I do this again?' It's such a rewarding experience."

Reece owes her involvement in the program to her son, **Seth**, a high school baseball coach and Buddy Ball board member. He saw the game being played elsewhere in Central Florida and told his mother they needed to bring Buddy Ball to Seminole County. "Buddy Ball has really made a believer out of all of us," she adds.

The league also has a huge fan in Altamonte Springs Mayor **Pat Bates**. "It's the most awesome thing I have ever seen," says Bates. "The delight on all of their faces,

and the fact that these young kids are giving their time for others is so good to see."

So while spring training and World Series dreams begin this month, dreams of a different kind are already coming true for dozens of local kids who just want to feel the excitement of swinging at a ball or scoring a run.

It's spring and they are playing baseball. Just like all the other kids. **L**



COURTESY OF SARAH REECE, BAMBINO BUDDY BALL

Buddy Ball gives all children the chance to play and be part of a team.