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## Special needs children play ball

July 30, 2012, 05:00 AM By Heather Murtagh Daily Journal Staff

Many lessons can be learned from sports — teamwork, confidence, responsibility, relying on others and the payoff of working hard.

Darrin Uecker is definitely a believer in those kinds of lessons. One of his sons, August, was going through the traditional Little League routes. Because of watching his older son take on the same team challenges, Uecker knew the next year wouldn't be a fit for August, who has autism.

It took about a year for Uecker to learn Little League has a Challenger Division for special needs children. August joined a Foster City team then returned to his Hillsborough home league where a Challenger division was created.

After two seasons, the undertaking of finding a supportive environment for his son has blossomed into a multi-sport operation inviting children with a variety of abilities to play together. It's also been warmly embraced by August's school, San Carlos-based Arbor Bay School — a nonprofit non-public state accredited school founded in 2003 that offers an integrated program of academics and occupational therapy for students with mild to moderate learning difficulties.

Now there are a few sporting options for local children. Volunteers and new players are always welcome to join the outings. Uecker's ultimate goal isn't to boost the local group. It is to raise awareness of the opportunities for children with special needs.

But the idea really started with 11-and-a-half-year-old August.

Uecker didn't want his son to miss out. Once on the Foster City team, August really enjoyed himself. Starting the Hillsborough Rays has meant reaching out to families with children with special needs. It's been a learning experience for all involved. The Challenger Division, for example, has two-inning games. During each inning, every child plays, hits and runs the bases. And, whatever help a child needs to make that happen is offered. It's that support which Arbor Bay Principal Susan Rose loves.

"Every child is successful where they are," she said, adding the hope is to wean children off the additional help when possible.

Uecker didn't anticipate the power of the uniform. Once all the kids were suited up, he noted it was magnetizing for them. The kids don't practice. For two hours on Sunday afternoons during the spring, they play ball. Baseball players in other divisions are encouraged to join on a specific Saturday to play with their buddies. Uecker has also been surprised at the impact on those children who help.

With the success of baseball, the team ventured into soccer this year through AYSO. It's a bit of a different setup but the same concept. Children come together, participate in drills to start then play a short game.

"It's organized chaos," Uecker said with a smile.

Rose wanted to add basketball to the winter options. Uecker obliged, then wondered if it was making a difference. Basketball was bit harder to be inclusive of all children. Often kids are just running around. Rose assured him, this is just fun — and kids need fun.

Parents and siblings have also gotten into the act by volunteering, supporting the children on the field, or growing a community of supportive fans. It's a chance for them to take an hour to relax and share resources, which can be difficult for any parent.

Regardless of the sport one watches, it's not a traditional game. But children have started to be more independent and learn the basics — like to stay on the field.

Rose noted one child who started with the original baseball team would simply run off the field. The child's parent would focus on keeping the little one on the school campus. After taking part in the other sports, the little one returned this summer understanding to stay within the diamond. It's a lesson that's building to that child's skill set, she explained.

"The winners are the ones who have the most fun," she said, adding these kids are having fun.

That's what Uecker wants — an opportunity for children to become involved. And, regardless of the activity, he said there should be a uniform. Kids love the uniform.

Those interested in becoming involved by enrolling a player or volunteering can email Darrin Uecker at darrin@theueckers.com or Susan Rose at srose@arborbayschool.org. The goal is access for all. Donations are accepted to help cover the cost for those who need financial assistance.



August Uecker plays Little League for the Hillsborough Rays.

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