

## University School Students Score a Home Run with Baseball Buddies



### Miami Herald



Billy the Marlin was a guest at a recent session of "Baseball Buddies," a program in Sunny Isles that pairs children with special needs with members of the North Miami Beach Little League.

*High School students create program for kids with special needs* By Michael Sharp

Three 16-year-olds have set out to help children with special needs. Noah Blum, Cole Bianco and Samuel Goldfarb -- all juniors at University School of Nova Southeastern University -- are members of the North Miami Beach Little League. Four years ago, they came up with the idea of creating their own league, which would encourage children with special needs to participate in organized sports.

"Our goal was to have every child involved," Noah said. "It's really special seeing kids with different disabilities go out there and play."

The three friends created a program called "Baseball Buddies." The program in Sunny Isles, which is sponsored by NMBLL, teams up children with special needs with members of the league and they

work together to improve the child's game. They presented their idea to Mark Greenspan, president of league, and the program began to grow.

"Each one of these kids has a buddy, and with the help they get from them, we're able to have actual games," Greenspan said. "When you look in the stands and see the faces of the parents as they cheer for their kid, that's the most rewarding part."

Every fall, the program has a six-week mini season. The fifth season concluded last Sunday with a cake celebration and a visit from Billy the Marlin, mascot of the Miami Marlins, while trophies were handed out.

Evan Schwartz, who has autism, is in his fifth season with the program.

"It's awesome and I have a lot of friends here," said Evan, 17. "I'm very active and I want to be a part of this as long as I can."

Evan's father, Allen Schwartz, talked about how the program benefits him and his son.

"It's a time for the kids to really enjoy each other and the parents to interact and share this experience as well," Schwartz said. "With the autism, Evan has a lot of challenges, but he gets to really have fun while he's doing this."

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"It's great, and it's fun with Billy around me," said Damani Pinnock, who was born prematurely and suffers from cerebral palsy. "My mom got me in, and I really wanted to win."

His mother, Monique Lockhart, said this league has brought out the best in her son.

"It's something he looks forward to every Sunday," Lockhart said.

"There's been nothing like this that has gotten him this excited and kept him this active."

Noah, Cole and Samuel hope to increase the number of kids involved for future seasons.

"At one point we had just 10 kids," Noah said. "Now it's at 25, and we just want to keep spreading awareness and providing more kids with the opportunity to play. Volunteers who didn't know what to expect were also really surprised at how well the kids handled themselves and at how good they were... not to mention that they had a really good time with them, too," he added.

One reason why the program has been able to expand to accept more children is due to fellow USchool student volunteers.

Noah, Cole and Samuel wish to thank:

Louis Berkowitz  
Seth Manilove  
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[Check back for a video on the program to appear here once editing is complete.]