



A Decade of Miracles

Montana's first and only Miracle League field opened in 2009 and is still going strong, providing the valley's special needs community a summer sports outlet

BY ANDY VIANO

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A burly man with long hair pulled behind his ears, a graying handlebar mustache and arms covered in tattoos sits quietly behind the backstop of a baseball diamond at Kidsports Complex in Kalispell, by himself but for a dog stretched to the end of its leash in search of shade on a hot July evening.

The man, Jimmy Ray Bromgard, watches the game intently and breaks his silence when his daughter, 10-year-old Rae Anne, steps to the plate to lead off her team's half inning. Rae Anne is spirited and upbeat, feeding off her father who volleys words of encouragement her way as she works a long at bat. Sometimes, in between pitches, Rae Anne looks back and waves at Jimmy. He blows a kiss in return.

When the inning is over, always with a home run and always with Rae Anne crossing the plate, she skips to the backstop, presses her hands through the chain link and expectedly places her mouth through an opening in the fence. She does this every inning, and every inning Jimmy dutifully rises from his seat, leans down to Rae Anne's level and plants a kiss sweetly on his daughter's lips.

Not far away, Dan Johns, one of the people most responsible for this game, this league and indeed this entire complex, is handing out free hot dogs, chips and bottles of water from a concession stand, taking in another of the countless innings he has seen on this unique field for special needs athletes, the only of its kind in Montana. And one day later, after this final day of the 11th season of Miracle League baseball in Kalispell has concluded, medals have been handed out and the participants have scattered to enjoy the rest of their summer, Johns, a self-professed baseball nut, reflected on a decade-plus of involvement with these remarkable athletes.

"I've never had so much fun," Johns said of his nine years coaching Miracle League teams. "It's the way baseball should be."

Rae Anne Bromgard bats at Miracle League field at Kidsports Complex in Kalispell on July 24, 2019. The field is designed for children and adults with special needs. Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

Rae Anne donned a black Colorado Rockies replica jersey this season, her first in the Miracle League. She is one of 80 or so players ages 6 and above who are split into eight teams, all named after MLB franchises, and spend the months of June and July playing baseball on Tuesday and Wednesday nights at Kidsports. The Miracle League concept originated in suburban Atlanta in the early 2000s, and the fields are designed specifically to serve special needs individuals with limited mobility. The surface is completely flat (the bases and pitcher's mound are painted on) and the dugouts are at field level, providing safe, easy access for players using a wheelchair or walker for mobility.

Johns found out about the Miracle League a few years after he helped start Kidsports — a sprawling, still-growing youth sports complex that hosts tens of thousands of baseball, softball, soccer, football and track athletes every year — in the late 1990s. Offering an opportunity for special needs athletes was always part of Johns' plan, but after the first special needs games were played on uneven dirt surfaces, he went looking for something else.

The Miracle League provided the template for an accessible field, but the project was expensive. The surface itself, which is similar to that of a rubberized track, cost more than \$170,000. The entire bill came in around \$350,000. Undeterred, he and others began the ambitious task of fundraising and, thanks in part to a large donation by the Kalispell Rotary, reached their goal in the mid-2000s. The Miracle League of Northwest Montana played its first game in 2009.

For the special needs community, its arrival filled a summer-long void. While programs in the Flathead Valley such as Special Olympics and DREAM Adaptive are flourishing and offer numerous opportunities in a number of sports, neither has baseball or softball.

“We have some of the best baseball and softball players you could imagine, and they would ask and beg to go to games,” Shirley Willis said. “To those individuals, this was a total blessing. Above and beyond anything they could comprehend.”

Willis is the executive director of [Lighthouse Christian Home](#), a residence for special needs adults in Kalispell, and Lighthouse has fielded a team in the Miracle League every year. She says gamedays at Lighthouse start early in the morning as players excitedly prepare for that night’s action.

“The conversation starts usually among the guys: Who do we play tonight? What time are we leaving? What staff’s on board? Will my parents be there? It’s the same as any other family, getting excited about going to do something in the community that you love to do,” she said.

Despite what the name implies, the Miracle League’s continued existence is no miracle. It’s the result of the continued generosity of numerous donors and volunteers, who ensure the league is free for every participant. In addition to free registration, players also get a free uniform, use provided equipment and enjoy a free hot dog dinner on gamedays. And the Miracle League has no employees. Johns and Jennifer Johnson volunteer as the league’s co-directors, and a handful of coaches (who pitch to the batters) are all volunteers.

Johnson, like Johns, has been with the Miracle League from the beginning. They coached the first two teams in the league’s inaugural season and have overseen all the action since, watching the league grow quickly to its current level and maintain

relatively consistent participation. Johnson has a personal connection to the league, too, as the parent of two special needs children, and she has seen the dual purposes the Miracle League serves. For avid baseball fans, it's a chance to play their favorite sport, and for baseball agnostics, the evenings are a pleasant summer night out with friends.

Samuel Micklewright, 10, holds up his medal after playing in a baseball game at Miracle League field at Kidsports Complex in Kalispell on July 24, 2019. The field is designed for children and adults with special needs. Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

“My 16-year-old son, this is what he looks forward to all summer,” Johnson said. “The highlight of his year is playing Miracle League baseball. He doesn't have a whole lot of social opportunities in the summer, so this is his social base in the summer as well.”

Miracle League games themselves are an exercise in positivity. Every batter reaches base once a ball is put in play, and runners move up one base at a time. When the last batter of the inning makes contact, they round the bases for a home run. No scores are kept. No wins or losses are recorded. The atmosphere in the crowd, on the field and in the dugouts is jovial, too, and every swing-and-a-miss is followed by some iteration of “you'll get the next one.”

“You see them giving hugs and high-fives to the other team as they get to the base; we encourage that a lot,” Johnson said. “And we encourage families to get involved and cheer for all the players.”

While the league's directors are confident in the future of the Miracle League in part because of the generosity they've previously seen from the community, the upcoming years will not be without their challenges. The program does receive financial support from Kidsports, a private nonprofit, but the now 11-year-old playing surface is starting to show wear and will need to be replaced before too long, and everyone involved would like to see participation increase, with Johns quipping, "there are 30 major league teams so we have some room to grow." Willis, for her part, draws confidence in the league's future from its inspiring past.

"This opportunity, they didn't have it," she said. "That opportunity wasn't there, and now for them to be able to share what their families do, for them to have that opportunity to go out and play ball once a week just like anyone else, now they have it, too."

Those interested in playing in the Miracle League do not need to make a summer-long commitment, and players from as far away as Libby and Essex have participated in past years, sometimes making it to Kalispell for just one game a season. To learn more about joining the Miracle League, volunteering to help or making a donation, visit [Miracle League of Northwest Montana](#) on Facebook or call Johnson at (406) 261-0117.

Johnson also runs a drop-in soccer program for special needs athletes at the Miracle League field that is free to attend and requires no registration. Soccer matches will be held from 5-6:30 p.m. on Sept. 9, 16, 23 and 30.

To learn more about the Miracle League and its history, visit www.miracleleague.com.

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