

Buddies on the Ballfield

By. Chris Mathis

The Cumming-Forsyth County Miracle League is a baseball league for players with disabilities. Volunteer “buddies,” such as Creekview High School’s JROTC cadets, help the special needs players play America’s pastime like typical kids. Sports participation for people with disabilities improves social skills and quality of life. Construction of a new facility for the Cumming-Forsyth Miracle League is almost complete and is planned to open in the middle of August 2023 before their fall season begins in September.

CUMMING, Ga. – In 2005, Forsyth County residents Steve and Lynn Kirby began taking their son to play organized baseball at Coal Mountain Park on Saturdays. However, for the first two seasons, Joshua and other members of his league would often sprawl in the infield creating dirt angels. This changed in 2006 when renovations to the park’s largest field were completed, transforming the traditional ballfield into a custom, cushioned-rubber-surface field that was flat, fully accessible and wheel-friendly. Despite lacking real dirt, grass and even bases, Field 1 became home to the Cumming-Forsyth County Miracle League.



[The Miracle League Association](#) is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping children with disabilities play baseball with the slogan: “Every child deserves to play baseball.” With over 350 member communities and their Miracle Leagues, every league utilizes one foundational concept: the buddy system.

Every game, each player is assigned a “buddy” who helps the player depending on their ability. “Buddies” help players hit, run the bases, field and sometimes more.

Behavioral scientists advocate the overall well-being of people with disabilities is improved by participating in sports activities. [In 2023, behavioral scientist Tânia Mira, along with fellow researchers](#), found that participating in sports correlates to higher measures of well-being, resilience and social support resources in people with disabilities. The Miracle League illustrates these findings on the field, extending off the field as well.

“If we can get a ‘buddy’ to commit to multiple games for the same player, the relationships that have been built beyond that have been really priceless, so that’s what we do recommend,” said Miracle League Program Director Stephanie Davis. “These kids are getting invited to birthday parties, to sit with them at lunch and to hang out before or after school.”

Davis believes the connections kindled by the buddy system, especially those of teenagers, are a true success for the Miracle League Association, often wondering whether the players or the “buddies” get more out of the program.

The Cumming-Forsyth County Miracle League

The [Cumming-Forsyth County \(CFC\) Miracle League](#) was established in 2005 by the [Forsyth County Lions Club](#). Since opening the custom field at Coal Mountain in 2006, the CFC Miracle League has run 7-week seasons in both summer and fall. The 2023 spring season saw

145 players across 14 teams, up from 12 teams in the fall of 2022. The CFC Miracle League has served over 500 unique players, and the player base is not limited to children.

Steve Kirby, the league’s president since 2019, said players range in age from 4 to late 60s, grouped mostly by ability. Kirby’s son, Joshua, was diagnosed with autism at a young age and still plays every season on the Pirates. 63-year-old Kirby has coached the Pirates since 2012, and plans to continue coaching them for at least another decade.



Creekview High School’s Impact

Creekview High School’s Army JROTC program sent 25 cadets and instructor First Sergeant E. Dodds Fletcher (U.S. Army, retired) to be “buddies” for the CFC Miracle League on May 20, 2023. According to Fletcher, the cadets, who must perform 15 community-service-hours per semester, helped Fletcher and Creekview’s other JROTC co-instructor get their footing.

“Both myself and my counterpart were new to Creekview last year, so we didn’t know, what we call in the army, the battle rhythm,” said Fletcher. “The kids helped us along, but at the same time, one of the very first things any of them asked about was, ‘Are we going to do Miracle League again?’”

Although he couldn't make it this year, Creekview JROTC Cadet, and rising senior, Cade Blanton volunteered in 2020 and 2021.

"In my experience, it's been about 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., three or four games in a day, helping them run around the bases and in the field," said Blanton. "There's just something cool about helping the kids play that our other opportunities don't have."

Creekview's JROTC program cadets have volunteered for the CFC Miracle League almost every season for the last decade. In addition to buddying up, the cadets have another special responsibility.

"The big thing that they really like is, before every game, we provide a color guard and they play the National Anthem," said Fletcher. "Not only do the cadets like that, but so do the players and all the fans."

According to Kirby, Joshua, who is now older than the Creekview cadets, still calls them "the soldiers," and everyone loves when the soldiers come.

Misconceptions About Buddies and Players

At all levels, people are pleasantly surprised to see teenagers regularly going out to volunteer as "buddies." Teenagers who are unwillingly brought to volunteer frequently enjoy themselves, and sometimes even become more involved. This may be due to misconceptions about working with the special needs players.

Because the Miracle League serves players with mental and physical disabilities, people may assume that mentally challenged players won't understand or follow the directions or advice from their "buddies." Though they may have difficulties communicating their thoughts and feelings, they mostly do comprehend communication and usually have big grins.

“Especially with autism, it’s such a common thing that our goal is to show they’re not different,” said Kirby. “Their feelings are the same, their emotions are the same, and if people are exposed to them, they’ll understand them better and not treat them differently.”

Davis said that some of the more gifted players graduate to competitive leagues too. Kirby mentioned that many founders of the CFC Miracle League went on to develop Forsyth’s Special Olympics program, meaning the two are closely interconnected. These organizations, however, are more than just about playing the game.

“When our buddies come out, the standard speech is, ‘Your main purpose is to protect the player,’” said Kirby. “Maybe even a bigger thing is to engage with them and talk with them. They want to communicate with you and to have an emotional bonding out there.”

Sports Participation Helps

[Researchers Roy McConkey and Sabine Menke published a 2022 *Sport in Society* article](#) in which they explained that people struggling with intellectual disabilities often experience increased social exclusion. They found that involvement in [Special Olympics](#) correlated with higher reported levels of social inclusion.

Davis spoke on similar improvements from Miracle League players, as well as improved family dynamics, that were disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic.

“We heard about a lot of regression for those kids that were in therapy and weren’t able to get what they needed during that time,” said Davis. “Everybody we’re talking to has pre-COVID numbers and is fully back to their funding and numbers of players.”

CFC Miracle League Future

[Tensions and anxieties rose when the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners approved a road-building project in 2020 that would cleave through Coal Mountain Park.](#) Shortly after,

community support for the Miracle League convinced the Board to announce plans for building a new complex at Lanierland Park.

Progress on the new facility has been slow and the league's 2023 spring season, though intended to be played at Lanierland, took place at Coal Mountain Park. However, the grand opening of the campus is planned for August 19, 2023, where the CFC Miracle League will continue improving lives.

“[Joshua] knows when we're moving to the new field, he knows in advance who the buddies are, when we are going to start and who we play well in advance,” Kirby said about the league's impact on his family. “It changed our lives. He's more socially active than we are, but we live through him in a lot of ways.”

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