

**Jerry Wolfe column****Baseball & Miracles**

By: JERRY WOLFFE , Of The Daily Oakland Press

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Tony is assisted by a "buddy," a person who helps the players during the game. Every player gets to play in every game.

January 8, 2004**If they can raise the money to finish it, the blind, deaf and/or mentally and mobility impaired people will be able to come play baseball on a "Miracle" field of dreams.**

"The Miracle League is based on every child being able to play regardless of their disability," says Stephen Peck, chairman of The Miracle League of Michigan. The nonprofit organization has raised \$200,000 of the \$535,000 needed to complete the special synthetic surfaced baseball field in Southfield and celebrate opening day the second week of June.

Peck, 47, of Birmingham says Michigan will be the first state with an accessible baseball field that also will welcome seniors' participation. The first Miracle League was founded in the Atlanta suburb of Conyers, Ga., in 1998. Some 60 other fields are being built or have been completed in states from California to Florida.

Disabled children who will play in The Miracle League of Michigan will range in age from

5 to 20.

"We're asking for a \$45 registration fee, which will include a jersey and cap," Peck says. "But we're told many families are so financially stressed from their child's disability that they are not able to pay the fee, so we're trying to find sponsors for them so everyone can play."

Peck also believes the \$335,000 needed to complete the project will be raised through our supportive community.

"This is being built on faith," he says. "We need a 'big angel' sponsor to purchase the naming rights for the field with the bidding starting at \$100,000.

"A company can receive great publicity, a tax deduction and the legacy of helping to empower those in need for a lot less than Comerica Bank paid for the naming rights of Comerica Park."

The Chicago White Sox recently helped finance two Miracle fields in Illinois and other Major- and Minor-League teams have supported fields in their respective states.

"This is a natural for professional ballclubs - it guarantees them a winning team every year," Peck says.

Maybe the Tigers and owner Mike Ilitch can take a hint.

"We're asking people and corporations to go to bat for a miracle," Peck says. "The only way we can do this is by sharing our story with business owners, corporations and the community and asking for their financial support."

"It is my goal to promote this to anyone who will listen and educate our community that children with disabilities are kids first - and not as different as they may appear," he says. "They are beautiful children of God, and they deserve the chance to play sports just like any other child."

Generations of play

Children won't be the only beneficiary of this one-of-a-kind field; senior citizens will have a chance to play, as well.

"We've got all these seniors," Peck says. "You see them in wheelchairs in nursing homes and they need something to look forward to. No one will be turned down."

On Oct. 15, The Miracle League of Michigan broke ground on the Miracle Field project. The field is located on the grounds of the Southfield Municipal Complex on Evergreen Road north of Interstate 696 and is leased from the city for \$1 a year for 20 years.

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"We considered other cities as the host site for this special field, but we chose Southfield based on their past history of helping the disabled community," Peck says.

The first phase included the excavation, paving and laying of an asphalt surface, he says. This spring, a special rubberized surface, called Mondo will be installed, replicating the look of a natural baseball field. It is the same surface used on Olympic tracks, Peck says, adding that Mondo can be colored to look like an infield and outfield.

"It's the special field design that allows a child with any physical or mental disability to play the great game of baseball without the obstructions of a normal field that would inhibit a child's movement in a wheelchair or a walker," he says.

The concept is to put the Miracle League field next to a regular field "so the kids don't feel separated, and able-bodied children will help them play through a buddy system," Peck says. "We're for inclusion, not exclusion."

For example, an able-bodied youngster or adult will help a disabled child or adult bat and run the bases. For a blind player, a sighted person will reach around and both will put their hands on the bat and swing at the ball. If someone is in a wheelchair or walker, depending on his disability, a "buddy" can assist him around the bases. The bases will be flat and painted white, removing all obstructions.

"We've been able to do all the underground and asphalt work," Peck says, "but we need \$335,000 by May 1 to complete this miracle."

Besides seeking a "big angel," The Miracle League of Michigan also is selling advertising signs in the outfield for \$5,000 each. Space on bleachers and the scoreboard also are being sold to raise funds.

Part of the team

Five decades ago, this writer remembers playing baseball on the dirty third-floor asphalt roof of Leland School for Crippled Children. Before people understood accommodation, we found ways to help each other play baseball. The pitcher would roll a softball to the children who used crutches and they would swing a crutch, hit the ball rolling toward them and "run" to first base on crutches.

It was simply marvelous to play on a spring day on that humble field on the roof in Detroit's Black Bottom area, across from Lafayette Towers.

I remember I was always picked last on a team until the day I made a "great" catch. Abe Amos, who had a heart defect but was powerfully built, lined a pitch from Tom Cato, who had hemophilia, like a rocket toward me at first base.

I reacted out of pure panic, putting my glove in front of my nose to protect my head. Then, I heard cheering. My teammates were yelling because I had caught the ball. I never did tell them it was just a reflex and I did it with my eyes closed.

The real miracle

Of course, too, there's another type of miracle that happens on a baseball field. You are not blind or deaf or a wheelchair user. You are a ballplayer - a normal kid - and not alone on the sidelines for the time you're wearing that glove, running the bases or holding that ball or bat.

Maybe good souls and companies will donate funds to help fulfill the dream of disabled children and seniors playing in a Miracle League of their own.

Companies that have donated money or done preliminary work on the field include George W. Auch Co.; Hubbell, Roth & Clark Inc.; Ghafari Associates' John Carlo Inc.; Nagel Paving; Johnson Brothers; Colasanti Concrete; PreMark Corp.; VIL Construction; Dan's Excavating; Scheelde Hampton; Qualite Sports Lighting; Wright & Filippis; Athletes Unlimited; The Brenda Lawrence Foundation; and Southfield Police and Fire Department Unions.

"It's not just the children with disabilities that benefit from our league," Peck says. "Many of the parents of these children have to give up their jobs to care for them and have become financially devastated from their condition.

"This league allows parents the chance to sit back and watch their precious child do something they never dreamt possible. For this brief time, they have the opportunity to see their child smile, have fun and forget about their ... problems, if for only an hour."

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To help

Donations can be made online at the Web site [www. michiganmiracle.org](http://www.michiganmiracle.org) Checks can be made out to: The Miracle League of Michigan and sent to 29508 Southfield Road, Ste. 205, Southfield 48076. For more information, call (248) 506-4604.

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