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Lucas Hagen

Birthday Blowout

Nine unique kids' birthday parties

Make your own SUSHI

with the help of Sakana's Johnny Kwan

West Metro Miracle Athletics

Championing the lake area's youth with disabilities

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The MIRACLE

The West Metro Miracle Athletics organization makes champions of everyone involved.

IT'S CLEAR WHO'S WINNING THE GAMES PLAYED BY WEST METRO MIRACLE ATHLETICS (WMMA): *EVERYONE.*

The clear champions, of course, are the special-needs kids swinging baseball bats and shooting basketballs. But the thrill of victory also goes to parents seeing their children enjoying the rare chances to play sports with peers. Triumph also treats the volunteers who facilitate the children's—and by extension, their own—good experiences.

"It gives me great confidence," says 15-year-old athlete Sophia Vignali, who plays both baseball and basketball from a wheelchair because of a

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LEAGUE

By Andy Greder · Photos by Emily J. Davis

rare central nervous system condition limiting her physical mobility. "[Basketball is] a fun sport to play. I like everything about it."

Lisa Adzick, president of the nonprofit she helped create in Minnetonka four years ago, comments, "I fell in love with these kids. They make my day."

Charlie Holmgren agrees. He volunteers as both a play-by-play announcer and a "buddy" assisting players on the baseball field. "It makes you feel good that you could impact them by giving up two hours of your Saturday morning to yell into a microphone or hold their hand as they run to first," he says.

With a win-win-win, it's easy to see why WMMA is a success and has steadily grown.

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"IT GIVES ME GREAT *confidence*. IT'S A FUN SPORT TO PLAY. I LIKE EVERYTHING ABOUT IT."

—SOPHIA VIGNALI,
15-YEAR-OLD ATHLETE, ON BASEBALL

Sophia Vignali uses a wheelchair because of a rare central nervous system condition, but that doesn't stop the 15-year-old from participating in both baseball and basketball.

A League of Their Own

Its baseball branch, the West Metro Miracle League (WMML), was based on the original league started in Atlanta in 1997. A Georgia father whose son had disabilities created an athletics league for his boy and other children ages 3–19 with cognitive or physical disabilities. Each year, the league grew and national news coverage spread this feel-good story.

In 2001, Minnesotan Kevin Thoreson, a single dad with two children with special needs, saw an HBO segment on the league and took it upon himself to bring it to the Twin Cities. The WMML's inaugural season in 2008 included 33 players on four teams with 250 volunteers. They played on a regular field at Bennett Family Park in Minnetonka.

Bob Jasper, patriarch of the local league, and Adzick of Minnetonka worked to build a rubberized baseball diamond complete with a grass-colored infield, dirt-marked baselines and in-ground bases so children in wheelchairs and walkers could more easily participate. "It's that old adage: Build it, and they will come." says Adzick—and this includes her son Christian, who has cerebral palsy.

Since the special field was built at Bennett Family Park, participation grew to 150 players and 1,500 volunteers in 2011. And the WMML's growth matches the national trends. About 200 Miracle League organizations are in action across the United States, in addition to ones in Canada and Puerto Rico. About 125 rubberized fields are in use, with another 115 in construction, WMML numbers show.

We Can Hoop

But the WMMA hasn't stopped at one sport. Julie Hagen wanted to register her son, Lucas, in sports leagues just as she did for her other children, but she knew it wouldn't work out for her son with Down syndrome. "I just knew without lots of direction, he didn't fit into mainstream events," says Hagen. "There was nothing else for him."

Then she learned of the Miracle League. Lucas later stepped into the batter's box with his mom in the dugout as coach. "It was delightful to have a league to play in and have a place of his own," Hagen says.

But her and her son's true home is on a hardwood basketball court. In front of their Excelsior home, 10-year-old Lucas can often be found wearing a LeBron James or Dwyane Wade jersey as he practices his jump shot.

"He is outside shooting everyday," says Julie Hagen, who played hoops at Minnesota State University–Moorhead. "Basketball is his favorite thing. I coached my daughter's third-grade girls' basketball team, and once again, I was looking for something for Lucas. He wanted to be on a basketball team so very badly. I looked all over, high and low: Is there anything out there?" Hagen asks.

While there were options for adults over 18, the answer for children Lucas's age was no. Through connections with special education departments and other parents, they decided another opportunity for these

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Lucas Hagen is a "little Larry Bird," according to his mom Julie, who herself is a former college basketball player. In the warmer months, Lucas can be found in the driveway of their Excelsior home, working on his jump shot.

children was needed. "Lo and behold, we had more than 50 kids register for it," Hagen says of March 2011's inaugural basketball camp, iCANhoop, and even more turned out for a second clinic last fall.

The kids—including Lucas, whom mom calls a little Larry Bird—go to a clinic environment to work on dribbling, shooting, passing and defensive footwork. "Many of these kids have siblings, and they are getting in that car and driving to their special event," Hagen says. "This is their chance to have their own special event. This is theirs."

Happy Moments

Volunteer Charlie Holmgren, a 17-year-old junior at Minnetonka High School, comes over from the Babe Ruth fields to announce WMML baseball games behind the mic. His goal is to turn anxious faces into smiling ones through introductions, pumping up the crowd and positive play-by-play as each player rounds the bases.

"Once they settle down and they get into the game, you get a lot of happy moments," Charlie says. "Most of the kids out there are smiling and having a good time. I try to get them pumped up because that's why we're there."

The athletes aren't the only ones smiling. Holmgren is, too. And all the "buddies" are.

The buddies or volunteers come from high school teams across the metro: Orono, Shakopee, Osseo, Minnetonka and elsewhere. "It helps the entire community," Adzick says. "I've heard teams say that it makes them play better" after they pair with kids in the Miracle League.

And the parents are smiling as well. "The emotion it brings forth in the kids will bring you to tears," says Krista Pietrini, mother of the confident Sophia. "The joy that they show is heartwarming." //

"THIS IS THEIR CHANCE TO HAVE THEIR OWN *special event.* THIS IS THEIRS."

—JULIE HAGEN, MOTHER OF ATHLETE LUCAS HAGEN

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