



## Challenger ball hits Milford comeback

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MILFORD — After a nearly 15-year absence, Challenger division baseball for children with physical and mental disabilities is making a comeback here.

An officially sanctioned program of Little League baseball, the Challenger division draws players ages 5 to 18 and gives them the opportunity to learn a skill, but also the joy of self-esteem and a sense of community, said Debra Marchese, the Recreation Department's adaptive program coordinator.

Players can use a plastic bat if they need to, hit a large ball, even a beach ball, Marchese said. "You may have a 15-year-old hitting off of a T-ball tee. Whatever allows them to participate. They will have uniforms, an awards program with trophies and a team photo."

The Milford Challenger program will also have its own Opening Day ceremony next month before setting out on a schedule of games against surrounding communities, including East Haven, West Haven and Hamden, organizers said. There is also the possibility that enough players will sign up for two local teams, allowing for inter-city contests.

"Challenger teams typically have 12 players, but we have 15 to 20 interested players, and the word isn't even out yet," said Brian Rowland of the Milford International League. The league will host Challenger games at its Brewster Road facility, he said.

"We took \$12,000 of the \$20,000 state grant we got to redo the T-ball field and make it accessible,' the league official said. "We're replacing the clay, changing some fencing around and putting an asphalt runway around the edge of the field so all players can reach it."

If a second Challenger team is formed, it will be hosted by the Milford National League, which plays many of its games at Ralph Clarkson Field, officials said.

When Milford last had a team for physically and mentally disabled players, its games were at Clarkson, said Mayor James L. Richetelli Jr., who was a Little League official at the time. That earlier program faded away as the children in it grew up and parents moved on to other projects, he said.

"I am very grateful to the leagues for the efforts to bring this back," the mayor said.

Marchese, who was a recreation therapist at the Greenwich YMCA for many years, said that many of the players in the current Adaptive Basketball program that plays its games Saturdays at the Tri-Beach Center will likely move over to baseball in the spring.

Those programs are among the first in a series that will be offered to children with disabilities. Milford Youth Soccer offers a TOPS program for those children and Marchese said that the recreation department plans to offer swimming, art and music programs for those with different ability levels.

Rowland said that Little League parents would get one or two requests a year from parents seeking a Challenger team for their children. "While we didn't have one, we'd refer them to West Haven, which has had an active program for a long time."

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