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## League makes every game a win

### Accentuating abilities

**A.J. CARR, Staff Writer**

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WAKE FOREST - When 9-year-old Nicky Graf connected with the ball, hitting it off a tee toward shortstop, the small crowd at Tyler Run Park broke into cheers.

Then, Nicky -- aided by his "buddy" Andrew Burress -- made the long haul to first base. From there, he and his wheelchair were helped to second and third bases, then finally home as other batters hit balls either pitched or off the tee. Each successful stroke created a ripple of applause.

Every swing is a triumph, every child a key player in the Wake Forest Dream League, which provides sporting opportunities for special-needs children such as Nicky. He is trying to come back from traumatic brain injury, the result of falling from a two-story window when he was 20 months old.

Parents and coaches cheered on a recent morning at the tree-dotted Wake Forest park as children ages 5 through 15 participated.

"Anytime you put kids together, it helps," said Chris Graf, Nicky's father. "You treat 'em like a baseball player, not disadvantaged."

The concept is similar to the Triangle's Miracle League. The Wake Forest version started as the dream of Maurice and Nicholas Savage, teenage siblings who wanted to provide a baseball experience for their 12-year-old brother, Victor.

Victor is partially paralyzed on his right side. Like the other 18 youngsters who play for the Dream League Mudcats or Bulls, Victor wouldn't have had a chance to participate in any other organized youth leagues.

When the Savages moved to the Triangle from New Jersey, there wasn't a place for players with special needs in this section of Wake County, so Maurice and Nicholas "decided to create one for him."

Both older brothers, who play recreation baseball, approached Ed Austin, Wake Forest Parks and Recreation athletics coordinator, and received a strong endorsement.

Then they recruited kids from schools and churches who wanted to play and "buddies," ages 10 to 20, who would assist players on the field. Local sponsors chipped in to help defray the costs of equipment and uniforms.

The brothers' dream turned into reality on opening day, April 26, when the marching band from



Nicky Graf, 9, returns a ball to the pitcher as he defends second base with his 'buddy' Laura Renaud, during a Wake Forest Dream League game last month. The league gives sporting opportunities to special-needs children.

Staff Photos by Takaaki Iwabu

Wake Forest-Rolesville High School played "The Star-Spangled Banner" and Mayor Vivian Jones threw out the first pitch.

Jim and Diane Savage signed up to coach the Dream League's Mudcats, Scott and Karen Brown volunteered to take the Bulls, and the games began.

They don't keep score. And they don't talk about disabilities but rather accentuate abilities. Every batter hits, and then walks, trots, runs or rides a wheelchair around the bases with a buddy close by.

"It's good to help these kids," said Burress, one of about 50 buddies. "They have fun, and we do, too."

Nobody tosses a bat in anger. Nobody utters profanity or argues with umpires. In fact, there are no umps. There are just a lot of hits and hugs, capped with a post-game snack.

"I like to hit and run," said the Bulls' Nicholas Lian, 13.

Mudcat Victor Savage succinctly summed his day up as "good" before attacking his snack.

"He loves it, being part of a team, putting a uniform on and feeling a bit more like everybody else," said Diane, Victor's mother.

Parents also are beneficiaries, seeing their children play and have a positive experience, be it hitting a dribbler off the tee, stepping on home plate or interacting with a teammate.

"For these children ... it's a unique opportunity to do something they many not have been able to do," athletics coordinator Austin said. "We plan to make it a part of our annual program."

Thanks, in large part, to Maurice and Nicholas Savage's dream -- and brotherly love.

[aj.carr@newsobserver.com](mailto:aj.carr@newsobserver.com) or (919) 829-8948

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