

**Palo  
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# Weekly

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**The high cost of  
higher education**  
Page 3

For the  
**Love** of the  
**Game**

Little League  
brings baseball  
to kids with disabilities  
Page 33



Norbert von der Groeben

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- **Upfront** City chooses new police HQ Page 3
- **Movies** 'Superman Returns' a soaring success Page 38
- **Sports** Triple crowns in track and field Page 40

# Section

# 2

Palo Alto Weekly • June 28, 2006

<b>Movies</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>Weekend Preview</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<b>Sports</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>Classified</b> .....	<b>46</b>



Bill Hillgrove, Alex Hays and Rebecca Ball wait for their turn to bat during a recent Palo Alto Little League Challenger Division game.

# A league of their own

## Kids with disabilities find a home on the baseball field through Little League



Spencer Elman, a member of the Palo Alto Giants, greeted a photographer to the team's recent game against Oakridge.

Photos by Norbert von der Groeben. Story by Jocelyn Dong.

At Greer Park on a sunny Sunday earlier this month, Little League player Spencer Elman, No. 12, spied a visitor with a camera.

"Want to take a picture of me in my catcher's gear?" he asked, hands poised to put the face mask over his red hair.

A few feet away, inside the metal backstop, Charlie Hughes, No. 24, was warming up. He gave warning with two sharp hits on home plate with his aluminum bat.

"Watch out!" he called out — to everyone and no one in particular at the same time.

Parents and grandparents settled in on the bleachers and nearby grass. The game between the Palo Alto Giants and the Oakridge White Sox was about to begin.

Just another Little League afternoon? Yes — and no.

Like young athletes worldwide, the Giants love playing baseball. But unlike many others, the two dozen or so members play in the league's Challenger Division, which the national

league created for kids with physical or mental disabilities. Now in its fourth season, the Palo Alto team has taken off like a line drive, growing in numbers as word has spread.

There are, naturally, differences between the Challenger Division team and others in the league — ones that go beyond the fact that a few athletes use wheelchairs.

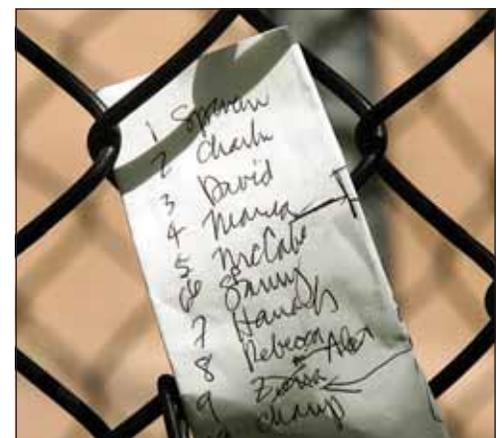
The division accepts all skill levels. Competing against other leagues' Challenger groups, the Giants travel throughout the Bay Area.

Games are two innings long. All players bat and run the bases. There are no outs; no one keeps score.

Teamwork looks a little different as well, thanks to the use of "buddies." During a recent game, 18 players swarmed the field, including one parent who covered centerfield with her daughter and a brother who helped out in left field.

"It gets pretty crowded out there," coach Bob Rorro said with a chuckle.

(continued on next page)



The Palo Alto Giants line-up. In the Challenger league, everyone plays and gets a chance to bat and run the bases.

## "The program is so great for the kids — such a confidence builder."

- Jenn Hinton, parent



Members of the Palo Alto Giants bring equipment for the Sunday, May 7 game.

## Challenger Baseball

(continued from page 33)

A sales executive for a Mountain View Web-hosting company, Rorro's been with the team since the first season when a young college graduate, Andrew Dantzig, founded the group.

The teamwork extends to the Giants' at bat, too.

Jenn Hinton accompanied her daughter, Jane, to home plate. Wrapping her arms around her 16 year old's and positioning the Easton bat over their shoulders, the pair went for the first pitch and hit a grounder to third. Then they bolted for first base, hand-in-hand, the teenager's pink-striped, white leather sneakers moving swiftly.

"Alright Jane!" her teammates called out. "Go Jane!"

Reaching their destination, mother and daughter stood together on base in a comfortable hug, waiting for the next hit.

"The program is so great for the kids — such a confidence builder," Hinton said in an interview. Jane participates in the Kiwanis Special Games, too, but that event "is a one-shot deal. This is a whole season. ... They really live for it."

Hinton has seen her daughter's abilities improve through her participation with the league.

"When Jane started, she couldn't throw the ball; now she can throw," Hinton said. Other children — affected by cerebral palsy — couldn't run on their own. With the aid of therapy and the incentive of playing on the team, they now love to run.



Right, Eric Knight with Evergreen Challenger chats with Palo Alto Giants third-baseman Alex Hays at a recent game.

*Right, Jenn Hinton helps her 16-year-old daughter, Jane, run the bases at a recent Challenger Giants game. Bottom, Eric Knight (left) enjoys a moment with Palo Alto Giant Alex Hays.*



“Seeing them grow is just great,” Hinton said.

Team members have grown emotionally too. Rorro recalled the scene during the team’s initial season.

“Some were afraid to get out on the field the first day. It was their first time to put on a uniform,” he said. “Now they can’t wait.”

Although some headline-grabbing Little League teams may reflect a win-at-any-cost mentality, parents say the Challenger Division is all about the game. In fact, when it comes to offering words of encouragement, team members practice equal-opportunity cheerleading.

“Yeah, White Sox!” a Giants outfielder called out to the other team’s batter during a recent game.

When a White Sox player with Down syndrome stepped up to the plate and finally succeeded in getting a hit, clapping erupted among the coaches, parents and players — of both teams.

“Go runner! Go runner! Go!” a Giants’ father urged as the boy took off, grinning, for first.

Such is the spirit of the game, Challenger-style.

“It’s very community-minded,” said Michael Steinberg, father of 16-year-old Giant Justin Steinberg. “In sports, that’s often missed. You focus on the competition.”

Some of that camaraderie shows in the easy relationships teammates have with each other.

Justin and his buddy, Spencer, stood near each other in the infield recently. When a White Sox batter got a hit, Spencer scooped up the ball and threw it to the pitcher.

(continued on page 37)



“Some were afraid to get out on the field the first day. Now they can’t wait.”

- Bob Rorro, coach



Samantha Doromal (back) and Champ Pederson play for the Palo Alto Giants.



Top, Giants Catcher Spencer Elman cheers his team on. Above, Macabe Scales, 11, celebrates a great play.

“It’s very community-minded. In sports, that’s often missed.”

- Michael Steinberg, parent



Charlie Hughes, Giants coach Bob Rorro and player Spencer Elman enjoy a birthday party in the dugout after a May 21 game was rained out.



Bai Wang pushes his son, 11-year-old Dawei Wang, down the base line.

## Challenger Baseball

(continued from page 35)

“That’s what it’s about, dude!” Justin enthused, high-fiving his friend.

Next up, a slugger from the other team approached the plate and the two players became wide-eyed.

“I don’t wanna get hit,” Spencer piped up.

“Me neither!” Justin said.

Spencer’s father, Brad Elman, sees nothing but good coming from the Challenger experience.

“It’s youth athletics at its best. It’s about camaraderie. Showing up is good enough,” said Elman, who helps coach.

Perhaps most significantly, the team — sponsored by the league and the nonprofit Community Association for Rehabilitation — gives the youth a chance to be a part of group activities, just like their brothers and sisters.

“For these kids, it’s the one day a week where they can feel like other kids. It makes them feel special — and makes them feel ordinary,” Elman said.

Giants player Charlie, 17, holds fond memories from the years he’s been involved. He rattles off the positions he enjoys playing: pitcher, catcher, left and right field and short stop. Last year, he hit a home run.

“I’m happy about playing baseball and being on a team,” he said. “We’re all friends.” ■

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*Macabe Scales, 11, celebrates with his team after a particularly fun game.*



About the cover: Macabe Scales plays outfield for the Palo Alto Giants on June 4. Photograph by Norbert von der Groeben.

“It’s youth athletics at its best. It’s about camaraderie. Showing up is good enough.”

- Brad Elman, parent and coach