



# Creating a Miracle

By Jim Kirkland

Gary Morton was at a wedding reception at County Park, San Diego, in 2015 when he heard the crack of a bat. The former Stanford baseball player and career volunteer youth league coach abandoned the party and followed the undeniable sounds of a baseball game like one of Pavlov's dogs. "Before I knew it, I was sitting in the stands crying my eyes out," says Morton.

What he was watching was the Miracle League in action, where able-bodied kids team with disabled kids to play America's great pastime. Having just the year before lost his daughter, Sarah, who suffered from a rare chromosomal disorder, watching the game produced a special ache in his heart. There and then, Morton decided to bring this miracle to Redwood City.

He investigated and discovered that the Miracle League was born in Conyers, Georgia, in the fall of 1998. It all started when Eddie Bagwell, a Rockdale Youth Baseball Association coach, saw a 7-year old boy named Michael in a wheelchair cheering on his 5-year old brother at every practice, every game. Touched and impressed, Bagwell asked Michael if he would like to play a few innings. The boy was overjoyed to accept the invitation and the rest of the team fought for the honor of wheeling him around the bases after he would get a hit. Before long, other kids with disabilities were asking if they could play too.

Two friends of Bagwell's — Diane Alford and her brother Dean — were involved with youth sports activities in the community. When Bagwell told them Michael's story, the Alford's did some research and learned there were no organized sports for the disabled in all of Georgia. Thinking this might be an opportunity to create something special for their community, they developed a baseball game where local children and adult volunteers would act as "buddies" to assist special needs "players." They included mentally or physically disabled youth between the ages of six and 18.

The rules were simple:

- A game is two innings.
- Every player bats at least once each inning.
- All players are safe on the bases.
- Every player scores a run before the inning is over (last one up gets a home run).
- Each team and each player win every game.

Once a date had been set, the word was put out that a baseball game would be held where special-needs kids could play alongside able-bodied ones. A T-shirt, hat and equipment would be provided. The Alford's didn't know what to expect when 32 special-needs kids showed up to play. The Miracle League began with 35 players on four teams that first year, which quickly grew to 250 participants. Today some 320 Miracle Leagues dot the greater United States and Puerto Rico, benefiting some 200,000 disabled children and young adults

Then the dream of building a unique baseball complex for the disabled was conceived. Dean Alford, president of his Rotary Club in Georgia, led the effort to raise the \$1 million and change needed to build a complex that would include a custom-designed field with a cushioned, rubberized surface to help prevent injuries. The facility also included wheelchair accessible dugouts and a completely flat surface to eliminate any barriers to wheelchair-bound or visually impaired players. The design also included three grass fields, which could be converted to the synthetic rubber surface as the league grew. In addition, accessible restrooms, a concession stand, and picnic pavilion were included in the design.

When Morton returned home he immediately sequestered his younger brother Scott, a recently retired superintendent in Sunnyvale's parks department, to help him form a Miracle League in Redwood City.



Scott and Gary Morton

Although the Miracle League is simple in concept, the operating and funding sides are complex. By the time the Morton brothers had secured the funds needed to supply uniforms, baseball equipment, obtain a 501(c)3 non-profit status and secure a field to play on, they had invested three years.

"We owe a huge dept of gratitude to the Redwood City Little League," Scott Morton says. "They not only provided most of the buddies, the announcer, home run fence and set up the sound system but they allowed us to use their permits to use the field."

Little League has a version of this concept: It is called the Little League Challenger Division, founded in 1989 and is the league's adaptive baseball program for youths with physical and intellectual challenges. The Challenger Division holds a springtime season, so the Mortons arranged their Miracle season to take place in the fall, so as not to compete and to extend the chance for both boys and girls to continue to enjoy the game.

The Miracle League of the Peninsula was inaugurated May 19 with an exhibition game on Bechet Field at Red Morton Park. On that day 30 players and 30 buddies gathered before a crowd of 60 and cried, "Play ball!"

Chris Beth, Director of Redwood City's Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department, was instrumental in bringing the day to reality. Appropriately,

he kicked off the event, which included the singing of the national anthem and a drum corps performance.

The players and buddies took the field as the first batter came to the plate. Some required a buddy to help swing at a ball placed on a rubber tube, T-ball style, as one 7-year-old confined to a wheelchair did. Another 30-year-old with a mental disability stepped up to the plate and demonstrated his prowess by belting a home run over the fence from a slow pitch delivered by an adult pitcher. The one change the Morton brothers made in their league was that there would be no age limit for players or their buddies.

Each player experienced the thrill of getting a hit, running the bases and listening to the crowd cheer them on. As promised, every batter hit, got on base and scored. And at the end of two innings nobody knew the score and no one cared. It was time for hotdogs, chips and soft drinks before the next game. Never underestimate the importance of hotdogs at a baseball game.

For many of the players, it was a life experience. But can Miracle League play continue? Ongoing administration and operating costs will require some hefty help. "Partnerships are what make any endeavor or like the Miracle League possible," Scott Morton says.

Andy Frisch, executive director of Kainos Home and Training Center for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, agrees and vows to do what he can to see the Miracle League succeed. "There is a desire among all of our clients to participate in the activities we all love, whether it's sports, recreation or volunteering. At Kainos, we're excited at the opportunity to have another outlet for baseball. The Miracle League is definitely playing to our wheelhouse."



The ultimate goal is to establish a special-needs ballpark similar to the Conyers' Georgia facility. The Mortons and their board of directors understand that with the much higher cost of land and construction in California, this is a dream attached to a very steep hill. Yet they are prepared to climb it.

Bringing able-bodied and special-needs youth together proved to be a real winner. Kids were recruited from Little League teams, churches, schools and acquaintances to join as buddies and make the Miracle work.

"I am a baseball player and want to help others enjoy the game," says Ryan Dodge, 12, who plays for the Redwood City Little League team the Peninsula Rays. "This was my first time doing something like this and it was really cool to see these kids having fun and the smiles on their faces."

Ryan's older brother and fellow buddy, Chris, 14, agreed. "It's such a privilege to be able to instruct these special needs people in the game of baseball," the avid baseball player says. "It's a pleasure to be a part of the Miracle League."

Kate McGuigan, 15, is a sophomore St. Francis High School and has a cousin with autism. "This was such a cool opportunity to help kids play an activity that they wouldn't normally have the chance to do," she says. "Baseball is a physical sport that can be kind of exclusive. ... "The players were so sweet and open, I left the field with a big smile on my face."

At the end of was a very long first game day, Gary and Scott Morton took a deep breath. Though both are lifelong coaches in youth soccer, softball and baseball, neither had taken on the responsibility of such an ambitious endeavor. "This isn't really about baseball," Gary Morton

says. "It's about bringing a unique community together."

His dream has taken on an unexpected and personal dimension. Two years ago, he was diagnosed with inclusion body myositis, a degenerative disease that attacks the muscles. With his weakening condition, Gary Morton understands that a mobility scooter awaits him in the very near future.

But the memory of his daughter Sarah and his own appointment with disability drive this former elite athlete to achieve something he could never have envisioned would become his passion and calling: to create a "buddy system" that allows disabled kids in Redwood City to experience the joy of participating in sports.

Win-win. Play ball. **C**

For more information on the Miracle League go to [www.miracleleaguesfpen.com](http://www.miracleleaguesfpen.com)