

Local Challenger Baseball program expands opportunities for young athletes

Written By Chris Perrotte

Two seasons after launching in Orangeville, Challenger Baseball is continuing to grow, giving more young athletes with disabilities an opportunity to play the game, build confidence and be part of a team.

Run by the Orangeville and Headwaters Minor Baseball Association, the program is currently in its second year and is expanding with 15 players participating, up from 12 last year. The Challenger program is in partnership with the Jays Care Foundation, an organization that helps run these programs for youth with disabilities across Canada.

Stephanie Coombes, the Challenger Baseball coordinator and coach, shared the program's most fulfilling aspects.

"The most rewarding part of running a Challenger Baseball program is creating a place where every player has the opportunity to experience the joy of baseball in an inclusive, supportive environment," Coombes said. "Watching players achieve dreams they never thought possible, build confidence, develop friendships, and discover the excitement of being part of a team is incredibly meaningful."

She added, "Beyond the game itself, it's about building a community where families feel understood, supported, and connected. Challenger Baseball is more than a league; it's a place where every player is celebrated, everyone belongs, and lifelong memories are made."

As a mother to a son with a disability, Coombes sees firsthand what this program can do for her son. Because of this program, her son can play the game he loves while feeling accepted, supported and celebrated.

"My son's love for baseball has grown tremendously, and he especially loves that Challenger Baseball is partnered with Jays Care Foundation. The confidence, sense of belonging, and joy we've seen in him both on and off the field have been incredible," said Coombes.

"Challenger Baseball has given him far more than the chance to play baseball, it has given him a community where he belongs and memories that will last a lifetime."

Other families involved with Challenger Baseball said the program has helped their children build confidence and enjoy the game in a supportive environment.

"Participating in Challenger Baseball gave Charlotte a place where she could truly shine, build confidence, and feel the pure joy of being part of a team," a parent told Coombes. "For our family, watching her hit the field each week surrounded by such an encouraging community was an unforgettable highlight that meant the absolute world to us."

Another parent highlighted the role volunteers play in creating a welcoming atmosphere for Challenger Baseball participants.

"The volunteers – both the incredible youth buddies and the adult helpers – are the heart of this program," the parent said. "Watching them encourage Henry, patiently work alongside him, celebrate every little milestone, and genuinely connect with each child has been so moving. They don't just teach baseball skills; they create confidence, friendships, and a sense of belonging that extends far beyond the field."

For the young athletes who take part, Challenger Baseball offers more than an opportunity to play – it provides a place to belong, build confidence and create memories that will last a lifetime.

The final game of the season for the Challenger Baseball program is on Friday, Aug. 7, from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. at Springbrook Field (450 Townline, Orangeville).