Striking out on their own

These brave new Little Leaguers are proving that baseball is not just for the able-bodied.

Photography by Stacey P. Morgan

Handicapped Little Leaguers are often assisted by "buddies." Helping Stephen Tuomey out front here is Jamie Kelly. A friend of Tom Tuomey, Kelly began by the Kansas Lakeers in Kelly Pyemont, whose brain stands ready to assist her in her home should she connect.

THIS IS HOW MUCH BASEBALL means to Kellie Pyemont. Last year, one of the coaches of the Nottingham Little League in Staten Circuit, N.J., gave Kellie a Nottingham baseball cap. "She has loved it," says her mother, Mary. "She wouldn't go anywhere without it."

Kellie has cerebral palsy and gets around in a wheelchair, so playing on a team, as her brother, Mark, 12, and four sisters, Rachel, 9, Jo, eleven) are all for granted. But then her dad, Tom Pyemont, heard about the Little League's Challenger Division for handicapped youngsters. He got a copy of a rulebook, about the new program and showed it to Kellie. "I asked her if she wanted to play," recalls Tom, "and she said, 'Yeah, I want to play, too.'"

Thanks to the efforts of Tom Pyemont and others, Kellie did play this year, for the Nottingham Little League Challenger team sponsored by ADP Tax-ion, Inc., the company where Tom works.

Kellie was one of about 10,000 youngsters who played at more than 300 Challenger Division leagues across the United States. Little League officialdom at first frowned when handicapped kids began playing on teams in New England. But after pressure from parents, they approved a task force headed by U.S. Sen. Robert Dole to study the idea. Last summer, the Little League changed its mind and invited the handicapped to join the nation's 2.5 million Little Leaguers.

"Every child should have the cherished opportunity to wear a Little League uniform, and that is the goal of the Challenger Division," said Creighton J. Hale, president of Little League Baseball.

Kellie's mother, Mary Pyemont, puts it more simply. "The first time every one of the kids ran to Tom, Sam, the kinds on their faces, everything went."

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