

Miracles Happen

Especially When A Community Pitches In

BY JACK EBLING



Even heroes need help. And Greater Lansing needs all the Vicki Caines it can get.

Of all the feel-good stories in the first 35 issues of this magazine, few can match the warm fuzzies of Caine's tireless commitment to Miracle League baseball and a community effort that led to the completion of the CASE Cares Miracle Field in DeWitt Township.

Caine has cared for more than two decades. She and the late Tony Noyola began helping youngsters with disabilities – and amazing abilities – play able-bodied, 5- and 6-year old tee-ball teams through the Lansing Parks and Recreation in 1990. From the Foster Rollers to a movement that's clearly on a roll, someone won't take the credit she deserves.

"The Miracle League itself is not my concept," said Caine, a huge-hearted coach and retired pediatric-rehab therapist. "Bringing it to Lansing wasn't my concept, either. The credit goes to CASE Cares. But none of this would've happened without so many great volunteers."

"This" is a beautiful, barrier-free ballpark that finally allows special-needs children to experience the joys of baseball in a safe, fun environment. And if you saw the dedication ceremony and first swings on May 14, it was perfectly OK to cry.

It was "The Inning of Winning" for so many with so much love to share.

The dream would still be just that if not for CASE Credit Union and people like Kathy Devine, another key player in a construction effort that began in 2007.

"It's a credit union philosophy of people helping people," Devine said. "About five years ago the board decided it was time we give back to our community in a major way. So they decided to establish the 501c3 non-profit – all volunteers, no employees."

Close to 500 people played an important part in a project that has cost close to \$700,000, with much more work in store. But before some 60 volunteers could show up on an April Saturday to landscape the grounds with tender loving care, a Michigan DNR grant was essential. So was a show of the spirit that makes Greater Lansing great.

The evening it all came to fruition, Caine had help from some of the best coaches anywhere, a busload of Michigan State baseball players. Though there is still a need for volunteers who can help on a one-to-one basis, that visit was one of the best experiences of 2012 for everyone involved.

Sophomore catcher Joel Fisher, who has family ties to Miracle League play, called it a highlight in a memorable season. His head coach was an easy sell, too. From his first few weeks with the Spartans, Jake Boss Jr. was on board with the project. And why wouldn't he be? His sense of family was instilled at an early age.

"This is incredible, just unbelievable," said his dad, an emotional Jake Boss Sr., who has seen a lot of victories but none any sweeter. "I mean, this is really something....Look at that little girl!...Now, watch her put that ball under her chin....Isn't that awesome!... My goodness!"

She – 4 1/2-year old Zoe Bosanic, an adoptee from China – was having more fun than the crowd, which was hard to do. Born without arms, she put the bat between her chin and her shoulder and did her best Miguel Cabrera impression. Then, after making tough guys smile and snuffle simultaneously, she looked at a small nick on my finger and said, "You have a boo-boo."

Do yourself a favor if you only have five minutes and read David Harns' story on Mid-Michigan's "Field of Dreams." And if you were one of the volunteers, you should sleep a little better tonight than you otherwise would. Congratulations – and thank you.

For our June cover story, we visit the real rock of Grand Ledge, 45-year head baseball

coach Pat O'Keefe. By waiting a few extra days to publish, we were able to take in his 21st Diamond Classic championship and 1,100th victory with the Comets. As writer Ryan Ambrustmacher put it so well, it's hard to find anyone more deserving for the Mt. Rushmore of high school coaching.

One of O'Keefe's best players in a long line of Grand Ledge greats, pitcher-outfielder Tony Wieber, has done a lot of impressive things in three seasons at MSU. Chip Mundy's profile of the Spartans' all-time saves leader gives us a little more insight about who Wieber is – and clarifies exactly who he isn't.

Harns was as busy as any freelance writer or photographer has been for **sport**, handling double duty for three pieces in this issue. He tells the story of Williamston distance runner Katie Bollman, whose bloodlines might have predicted that passion, and introduces us to Upward Sports, a new way to play.

Bollman is one of the state's top scholar-athletes, as recognized by the MHSAA. And Upward Sports stresses values over victories as its mission. Both offer a sense of perspective and a reminder that games can enrich our lives without becoming life-or-death.

Few athletes have shown greater versatility or had more spectacular moments in one month than Mason High bowler and golfer David Smithern. As writer Mark Meyer explains, what are the odds of anyone leading a team to a state championship, firing a hole-in-one and bowling a 300 game in a matter of weeks?

Finally, our Spartans Will salute looks at the trailblazing, turf-caressing career of Heather Nabozny, an MSU alum whose green thumb has kept Comerica Park beautiful, as Andrea Nelson tells us.

And David "The Mad Dog" DeMarco, restaurateur/raconteur/radio veteran on WVFN, contributes our Finish Line backpage column. A Lansing lifer, except for a few years in Mount Pleasant, he knows what makes this area special and shares his love of baseball.

Actually, he'd make a great volunteer for Vicki Caine. ★