

KIDSPORTS gives all kids a chance to take the field

■ **BASEBALL:** Matt Perpinan gets a chance to play and an opportunity to be on a team

By Jeff Shaw
Freelance Reporter

It's late July, and Willagillespie Elementary School is alive with children in uniform, carrying balls and gloves. At 5:30 p.m., spectators awaiting the last baseball game of the season watch nine kids take the field.

One player, however, doesn't run.

Matt Perpinan was born with spina bifida, a birth defect that leaves many of those who have it unable to walk. He has been in a wheelchair all of his life.

Still, he has played a full season in right field for the Moffitt Elementary/Douglas Gardens third grade boys team — with assistance from his father and from teammates willing to play the role of designated runner. Make no mistake, though, Matt plays the game on his own. In one of the last games of this season, Matt had three hits.

"We've tried to accommodate his special needs, but still have him play the game ... we're just having someone act as his legs," said Bob Josephson, CEO of the Emerald KIDSPORTS Foundation.

That someone is Jaime Perpinan, Matt's father, who plays a key role in the modified game designed by Josephson and KIDSPORTS Program Director Jim Pilegreen. Rule modifications were necessary — Matt is the first wheelchair player ever to participate in KIDSPORTS.

KIDSPORTS is a Eugene-Springfield organization that provides youth in kindergarten through eighth grade with organized sports teams.

When Matt plays defense, his father stands in right field with him, ready to push Matt towards any ball hit his direction. If Matt is unable to reach the ball because of the height of his chair, his father can hand it to him — but Matt must catch the ball or make the throw to the infield himself.

When Matt bats, Jaime pushes him up to the plate. He remains there to move the chair in case a pitched ball comes close to hitting his son. Once Matt hits the ball, a designated runner takes off from the right side of the plate.

"Everybody wants to run for him," said Mark Truebe, Matt's coach. "He's real popular on the team."

Truebe acknowledges that Matt has overcome adversity to play

this year.

"Obviously, it's a lot more difficult for him," said Truebe. "When you swing a bat, your body pivots. His body doesn't pivot, because it's sitting in the chair."

This year, Truebe said, the team has done a lot of "experimenting" on things like "getting [Matt] the right glove," but the experiments have paid off. "I think he's had a lot of fun, and he's done well," Truebe said.

Matt's mother, Vikki Perpinan, has been trying to find her son a place to play for years. Schools like Moffitt, she said, don't have the facilities for wheelchair sports due to extensive budget cuts.

Matt's mother believes this experience has been invaluable to him, especially in terms of "learning what it was like to be on a team."

"He's nine years old, and has never really had this opportunity," she said. "I've been calling people for years to try to get something like this for Matt to do. Now that KIDSPORTS has finally said yes, I'll definitely be trying other sports."

Josephson said, KIDSPORTS has been concerned in the past about safety for physically challenged participants.

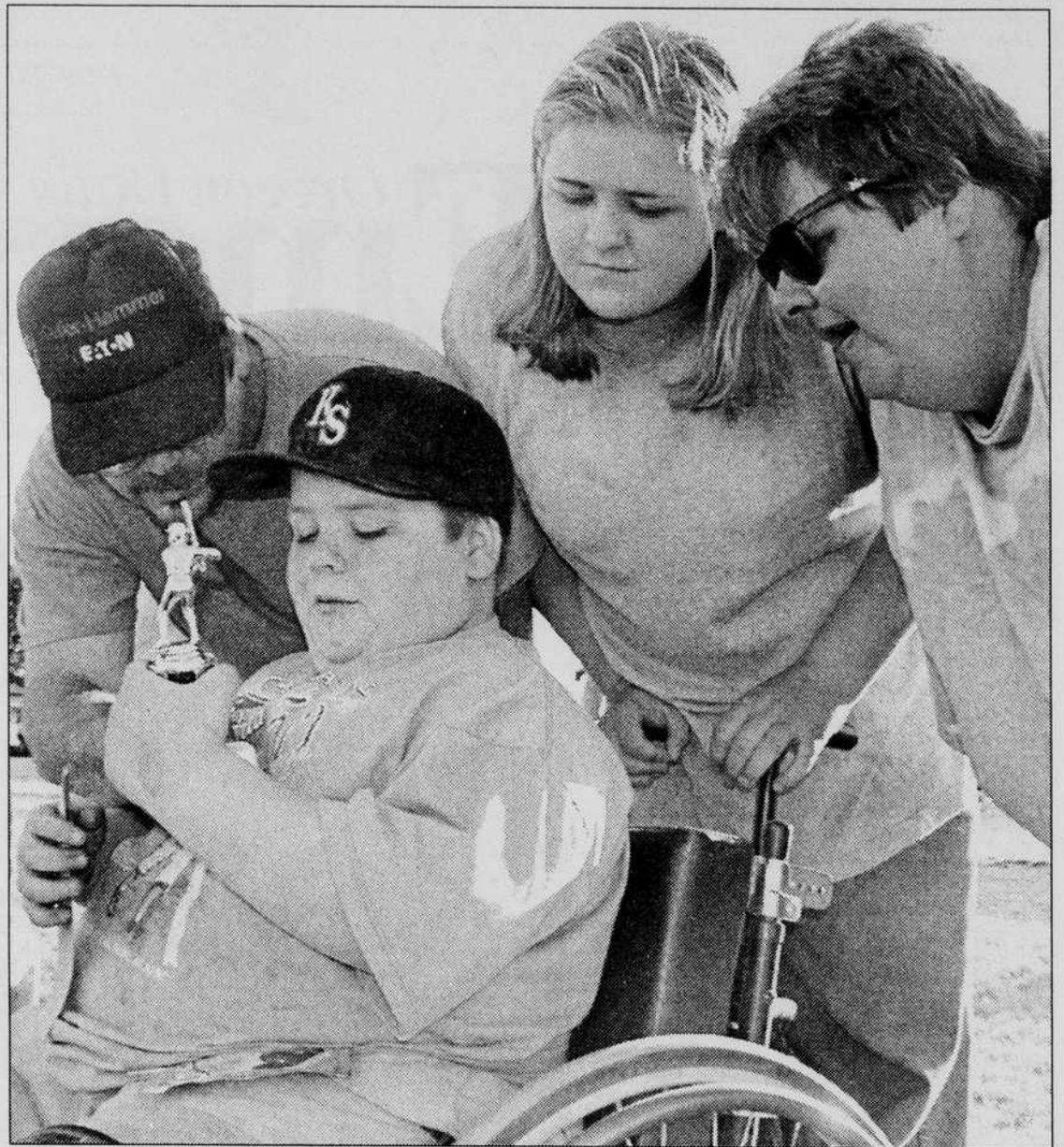
"We have felt that it was difficult for a kid in a wheelchair to play without some risk of being injured. We have come up with a system that worked, that allowed him to play, and didn't create any hazard," Josephson said. Precautions included consulting the opinion of Matt's physician and writing into the modified rules that Matt wear "any ... protective equipment as required by his doctor."

Both Josephson and Vikki Perpinan expressed the belief that Matt playing this season represents an important precedent.

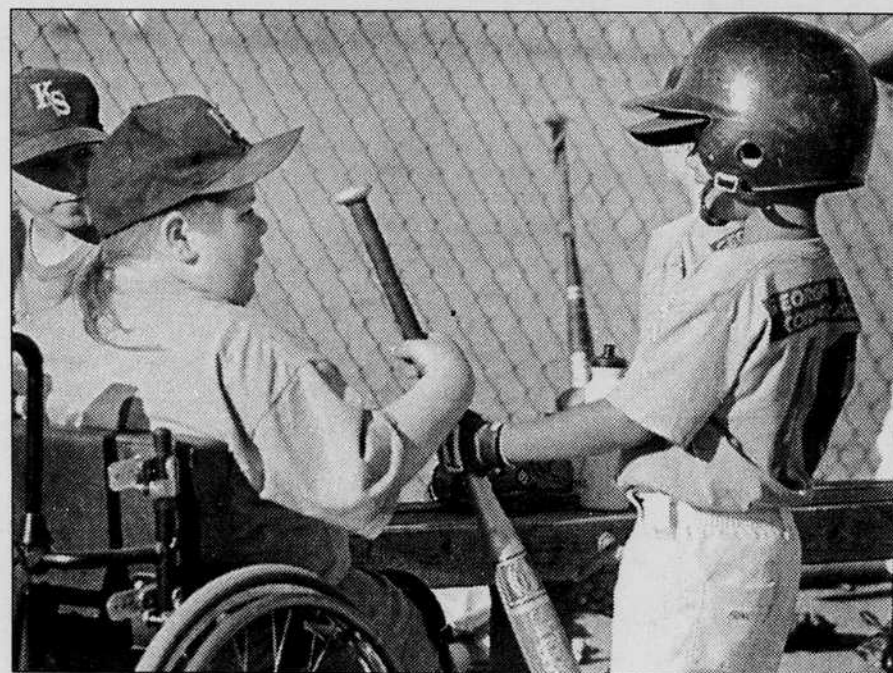
"As society comes to accept physically challenged people more and more, I think there will be more of an effort made to accommodate them. KIDSPORTS made an effort to accommodate this boy with just a slight modification of the rules," Josephson said.

Vikki Perpinan emphasized the immediate effect Matt's season could have on the surrounding community.

"My goal in all this is to let other moms know their [physically challenged] kids can play now. I know I'm not the only one who has been calling KIDSPORTS," she said.



CHAD PATTESON/Emerald (above) Little Leaguer Matt Perpinan celebrates his team's victory of the last season game while his father Jaime, sister Andrea and mother Vikki share the proud moment.



(left) In preparation for Matt's turn at bat, a teammate hands him a bat. Matt hits the ball during games and a designated runner runs in his place.



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