

The Commonwealth Games are not normally an event known for awarding participation medals. The precedent, however, was set when the Games, in conjunction with the Able Games, added Challenger Baseball this year.

The softball diamond at Liberty University was the site of the first two Challenger Baseball games to be part of the vaunted lineup put on by Virginia Amateur Sports.

Just like every other Challenger Baseball game, both games ended in a tie. The point is not to compete, it's to play. Challenger Baseball, sanctioned as a part of Little League since 1989, is for children ages 4-18 who have physical or intellectual challenges.

Sid Witt has been the man in charge of Challenger baseball in the Roanoke Valley since it was founded by Willis Waldron in 1989. Waldron recruited Witt and his father to help him get the program up and running. In year 34, Challenger is now part of the Commonwealth Games, joining fishing, rugby skills, along with track and field as sports where physical and cognitive challenges are set aside to allow participation from anyone, regardless of the challenges they face.

Challenger Baseball was championed by VAS Games Director Amanda Mangum. "My daughter played Challenger Baseball for over 10 years. I was able to see first hand the impact each practice and game not only had on her, but to so many others of all ages and abilities. Knowing the importance of having different opportunities for these athletes to be a part of the Virginia Commonwealth Games was huge in creating the Able Games. Our goal is to add more events each year as well as help bring awareness and growth to organizations we partner with like Challenger Baseball."

"I've always said for us it's not necessarily about the game of baseball," Witt says. "Our games are a chance to get kids out, be part of a team, build their self-esteem. It's occupational therapy, just being on the field."

For many kids with challenges who are unable to participate in sports with their friends or siblings, Witt says Challenger games put them in the starring role.

"They say, 'Hey you get to come watch me play, too,'" he says.

Everyone who plays in the game plays in the field and bats every inning. Most of the players have helpers – a family member who helps with a wheelchair, for example, or points out the best thing to do with the ball. They help players on offense bat and get around the bases.

No one is counting outs or runs. The players are on the field having fun. In Challenger, that's the point.

"They got to play one game, two innings, and everyone played exceptionally well, hit the ball really well," Witt says.

Every athlete got a medal.

"I told Amanda (in her role as Games director), 'You really hurt me with these medals. They're so much nicer than the ones I give out each year, I'm going to have to step up my game,'" Witt says with a laugh.

In addition to the nice medals, each player received a t-shirt that they donned for the game and lunch. Playing the game on LU's softball field was a treat, too, ranking it as the top facility for events.

"The parents really loved it," Witt says. "Everyone was so pleased. I didn't see one hiccup; the Commonwealth Games people really had their ducks in a row. They did such a good job, I didn't hear one negative thing. Everyone absolutely loved it."

The Myrias Group of Virginia was the sponsor who made this event possible. Witt says all the people who helped, especially those who offered sponsorship dollars, deserve thanks and praise.

There should be more of the same in coming years.

“People were saying they hoped we could do this again,” Witt says. “I said it’s called the ‘Inaugural’ event in the Games. That implies the first with more coming.”

Of the 60 players on the four teams, 57 came from the Roanoke area, two were from Charlottesville and one from Lexington. Witt and Games organizers would all like to see the number of teams increase as teams based in Richmond and Tidewater – there are several teams in each area – hear about the opportunity and will participate.

They’ll also get participation medals and the games will still end in ties. That’s OK, because in Challenger Baseball, they’ll be having fun.