

BackStory



Football Buddies in action

A Special League

FOR ALMOST A DECADE, PARKLAND BUDDY SPORTS HAS PROVIDED STRUCTURED, YEAR-ROUND ATHLETICS FOR SPECIAL-NEEDS CHILDREN

BY ALYSSA FISHER / PHOTO BY KEN WEBSTER PHOTOGRAPHY

Buddy Sports Fast Facts

- No age limit.
- Not limited to Parkland residents; there are players from Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties.
- Scholarships are available for volunteers in their senior year of high school.
- Scholarships are available for players who may need extra support, from swimming lessons to help with reading skills in the summer.
- Visit parklandbuddysports.org for additional info.

Joe De Braga was adamant that his kids grew up knowing they had no boundaries, that they could do anything.

For his son, who has Down syndrome, Parkland Buddy Sports sets that message.

In the early 2000s, the city of Parkland recognized the need for an athletic program where children of varying ability could play and interact with each other in a fun, noncompetitive environment. Soccer Buddies grew out of the city's recreational soccer program, with about 20 kids and a group of dedicated volunteers.

The Buddy program blossomed through word-of-mouth, driving parents to request more sports. In 2009, after eight years as part of the city's leagues, Parkland Buddy Sports became its own entity, a nonprofit organization with nearly 500 children and even more volunteers participating in seven programs come January, with the introduction of Yoga Buddies.

"The city could not be more receptive and accepting and supportive of everything that we do," says De Braga, who has been involved since the beginning—from parent to coach to board treasurer.

Each sport—soccer, flag football, basketball, running, tennis and golf (and yoga, when it begins)—has eight to 10 free weekly sessions, August through May. In the summer and during the holidays, Kickball Buddies gives the kids an outlet to run and play outside.

In addition to volunteers, two coaches on the field give one-on-one attention, says Wendy Zipes Hunter, the communications director.

She remembers a parent wanting his child to learn to kick a ball. One of the coaches spent time lining up the ball and helping the child connect with it. "It was a big achievement—a super-exciting moment" she says.

The park can accommodate all levels and abilities. Children in wheelchairs and those with walkers are stars on the football field. There are plenty of high-fives and hugs. The smiles are boundless.

"When you come out there, it just makes you feel so good and happy," Hunter says.

De Braga says coach Barry Cohen of Soccer Buddies, which began late fall, often describes the watching on the sidelines and participating as "magical."

"And it is," he and Hunter say in unison.