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## It's A Blessing

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THE YEAR IN REVIEW



Former baseball major leaguer Frank Robinson visits with Nicholas Kirkpatrick, 12, of Columbia, Ill., the recipient of the Good Sport Award during the National Sportsmanship Awards here in June. Chris Lee | Post-Dispatch

# It's a blessing just to play

By Douglas E. Abrams

A few years ago, players for the Central Missouri Eagles Youth Ice Hockey program, which I help coach, spent the afternoon with sick, injured and disabled patients at a local children's hospital who face substantial hurdles before they can play the sports that so many families take for granted.

At a hockey game a few hours later, I watched a father scream at the losing team's coaches for depriving his 10-year-old son of about one minute of playing time. Too bad this healthy boy's father had not visited the hospital with us to see boys and girls who were suffering real deprivation.

Wanting to win is understandable. In my fourth annual countdown of top youth sports stories, however, children who confronted special challenges this year serve as a reminder to their elders that the scoreboard is much less important than it may seem.

**5. When Coach Steve Siskin's** team of special-needs players scrimmages other youth basketball teams in the Los Angeles area, families can see plainly why play remains one of childhood's greatest blessings. Dennis McCarthy, a columnist for the *Daily News of Los Angeles*, described it this way:

"When you see kids in wheelchairs and others who can hardly walk, needing a 'shadow,' a volunteer, to help them dribble the ball down the court and take a shot, well, the bad game you just had or that sore leg hurting, you doesn't seem that important anymore."

**4. When the Bethlehem Youth Hockey** program based in Albany, N.Y., put together a team for a sport called sled hockey, 13-year-old Luke Wilson, who was born with cerebral palsy, finally could play hockey with his twin brother. (In sled hockey, players sit on sleds with blades underneath and propel themselves using two short sticks that have picks that grab the ice. Disabled players like Luke are strapped securely to the sleds.)

"You gotta get them out there," Don Gallo told *The [Albany] Times Union's* Mark McGuire. "[Gallo's] 14-year-old son, Derek, has spina bifida and gets around [off the ice] with a wheelchair or forearm crutches. ... Unlike with some other youth sports, wins and losses don't drive these parents. 'We could care less,' Gallo said."

**3. Earlier** this year, *pelinks4u.org*, an Internet newsletter specializing in physical education topics, told a story about maturity and selflessness in youth sports in rural Washington state:

Michael Denny, the wrestling coach at Housel Middle School in Prosser, Wash., asked his counterpart at Morgan Middle School in Ellensburg, John Graf, if he knew of a Morgan wrestler who would agree to an exhibition match against a Housel wrestler with cognitive and physical disabilities. Denny said he knew that

coaches are also very supportive of him and encourage him to participate in practice and learn wrestling. ... For Connor [Sherwood] to agree to this is both very mature and admirable. He made our son's year. It was a beautiful thing to watch, and we will never forget what memories he has given our son and us."

**2. Nick Kirkpatrick**, a sixth-grader at Columbia (Ill.) Middle School, had just finished competing in his heat at a 2007 Oklahoma track meet for athletes with physical disabilities. He noticed that a girl could not enter the next heat because a wheel had broken off her wheelchair. Nick, who has cerebral palsy, immediately lent her his wheelchair.

"I figured she had trained all year, just like I had," he told *Post-Dispatch* reporter Kathleen Nelson before a ceremony last summer at which he received a National Sportsmanship Award. "If she didn't have a chair, she wasn't going to have a chance to race. I thought about how I would feel, so I wanted to help if I could."

**1. John Challis**, an 18-year-old student at Freedom High School in Beaver County, Pa., was battling metastasized cancer last spring and asked his school's baseball coach, Steve Wetzel, for "one last chance to bat in a game," reported Mike White of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Wetzel put him in as a pinch-hitter, and Challis "lined the first pitch to right field for a run-scoring single." The opposing players, who were aware of Challis' condition, "put down their gloves and gave him an ovation" as he made his way around the bases.

Challis co-founded the Courage For Life Foundation to provide sports experiences for other high school athletes with life-threatening illnesses. He died in August.

Florida Marlins pitcher Mark Hendrickson, like many other star athletes, heard about Challis' story and "reached out to the young man before he died. 'Sometimes we get so caught up with what we're doing on the field,' Hendrickson told the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, that we forget 'it's kind of secondary when you think about it in the scheme of life.'"

## Lessons for all of us from young athletes of 2008.

his wrestler, Karter, could not win, but Karter and his parents and coach hoped the boy would be able to savor an athletic experience previously beyond his reach. The only concerns, Denny told Graf, were for Karter's safety and dignity. A 12-year-old Morgan wrestler named Connor Sherwood volunteered to participate on those terms.

The match between Connor and Karter took place before a large and enthusiastic crowd at the end of a three-way meet. Connor made sure Karter had the opportunity to apply an assortment of holds and perform various moves. Unbeknownst to either coach, however, Connor was keeping a close eye on the clock as both wrestlers began to score points. When the match ended, Karter had won, 9 points to 8.

Steve Jefferies, publisher of *pelinks4u.org*, included these comments from Karter's parents: "Our son Karter is special. He is developmentally delayed and has the mentality of a 6-year-old. He does not know that he is different from anyone else who he goes to school with. His classmates are very supportive of him. ... His

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