

Autism Awareness Challenge offers great matchups and more for a special cause



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One of the nicest things about baseball and softball season in New Jersey has been the amount of weekend tournament and showcase events that have become common, many of them benefiting specific causes and charities.

One of the oldest, and certainly the largest, is the Autism Awareness Challenge, which recently took place at Community Park in North Brunswick.

The original schedule called for 20 baseball games over three days featuring 40 teams representing 10 different counties. It also included 15 softball games involving 30 teams over two days. Some of the later games were postponed by rain, but makeups have been taking place among those schools because the event has become so important not just for the teams, but for other people involved.

That, in fact, is what has made the Autism Awareness Challenge so special. Even though it attracts many of the top teams in the state, it also involves individuals from the schools affected by autism. It honors them through their own participation, and makes the players appreciate first-hand the cause attached the event.

The Autism Awareness Challenge was created by Mike Garlatti, a long-time baseball coach and scout, 15 years ago with modest goals in mind.

“After our son was diagnosed with autism, I wanted to bring together two things in my life, baseball and autism, so in speaking with some of the local Greater Middlesex Conference coaches, we collaborated to have a few baseball games to promote Autism Awareness,” he said.

After that, the event grew and grew.

“Each year, the event grew bigger,” Garlatti said. “Fifteen years ago, it was just GMC baseball teams, then we added some teams from Union County. Then as more and more teams around the state asked how they could be included, it just grew bigger than we ever imagined.”

Eventually, softball became a part as well.

“While I started the baseball side of it, Shaun Morrell, the AD from North Brunswick, reached out to us about bringing softball into our event.”

While the softball portion involves teams mostly from the GMC, with others this year from Essex and Union, the baseball event this year involved teams from Middlesex, Union, Mercer, Ocean, Essex, Morris, Hunterdon, Bergen, Monmouth and Somerset counties.

Bringing together so many teams, many of them state powers, means great competition. But that’s only part of the story at the Autism Awareness Challenge.

The teams first gather for a dinner held in late March. They also stage fundraising events which support the cause. And in one great thing which has become an Autism Awareness Challenge tradition - teams bring along first-pitch throwers who relish their chance to participate in the event with classmates.





Mikey Calella exchanging high fives with the Robbinsville team after throwing his first pitch

“Each team is asked to bring a first pitch person to throw out the pitch before each game. So far this year we have had almost 90,” Garlatti said. “The smiles are contagious and incredible. The throwers then run down the line high fiving or first pumping each of the players on the team and then joining in a team picture. Its a magical moment, we get repeat requests, year after year, asking if they can come back and do it again. I think Edison had the most this year with seven first pitch guests, with most of them returning from past years. It doesnt always go so smooth, but it helps bring awareness to everyone attending and is a good way for the teams to realize how fortunate they are to be playing with no limitations.”

One of the opening baseball games this year was between Robbinsville and South Brunswick.

Robbinsville’s first-pitch throwers included student Michael (Mikey) Calella, as well as Special Education teacher Christie Agos, and Autism teacher Carly Peditto.

Jessica Calella, Mikey’s mom, is thrilled that her son gets to participate in an event like the Autism Awareness Challenge, both for the opportunity to be involved and to also be accepted by a group such as the baseball team.

“Mikey was so happy to be invited to throw out the first pitch for the Robbinsville game for Autism Awareness,” she said. “He loves to be included and

accepted by his peers, as you can see by his smile. The RHS baseball team and coaches were so positive and encouraging and we had a great time!

“As parents, we are thrilled that the community recognizes and accepts Mikey, and offers him these opportunities to participate,”she said. “It means so much to us to be included in these events, and to show off how wonderful our child is! We are extremely grateful to Mikey’s team of teachers and paraprofessionals, case worker, and administrators at RHS for always thinking of our special needs kids when opportunities arise.”

“From my interaction with Mikey, he was beyond excited to participate in this event,” Peditto said. “He talked about it all week with a big smile on his face and practiced frequently at home and in school.” The teams also wear special uniform shirts for their games, which has become another tradition.

“There is a lot that goes into scheduling the event, having teams from around the state brings a great level of competition,” Garlatti said. “We have teams that normally dont play each other, which makes it exciting for not only the teams but for the spectators as well.”

Part of the awareness component is that beforehand, players are given team-represented puzzle pieces with some key points about Autism to share with anyone who signs their puzzle piece and gives a donation.



“In March, we have a kick off dinner where representatives from each of the 70 teams meet up to exchange their puzzle pieces,” Garlatti said. “We ask them to take them back to their school and display them showing Autism Awareness. They also receive their Autism Awareness Challenge logo team shirts and listen to speakers. The teams are then introduced to our featured home run hero. This idea started a few years ago when we helped Mike O’Donnell, the Middlesex AD, whose son Sean was diagnosed with brain cancer. We wanted to do something to show our support and the idea was so successful that it became a part of our yearly event. For every home run hit a donation is given to the person/charity that we have chosen for that year. When a player hits the home run, they then sign a banner designed for that years hero. This year, we chose an 11 year old girl from Edison, Alexandra “Allie” Ewing, who is battling a brain tumor.”



All in all, the participating players are taking part in a competitive game in North Brunswick, but also learning lessons about inclusion which go much deeper.

“This is a fantastic program for students with Autism to be included in the community, for others to interact with, and to see how amazing and wonderful these students are,” Robbinsville teacher Peditto said. “As cliché as it sounds, there are no words to truly describe how amazing it is to see this happening all over, and seeing programs generating awareness in more and more places. Throughout my experience, students with autism were always ‘mislabeled’ and these programs are helping bring awareness and inclusion to students.”

To further that point, Millburn is a school that has participated in the Autism Awareness Challenge for nearly a decade, having developed what’s become annual baseball matchup with South Plainfield at the event. Even though the Millers are one of the top programs the state, the competition is only a partial reason why the Essex County team returns year after year. The cause is equally important, if not more, and the players fully understand why they are there.



“I’m very involved in clubs in school that deal with helping out kids with special needs,” said Millburn senior Max Levine. “My brother has special needs, so it hits close to home. Having those kids being involved in the game, being there and throwing out the first pitch makes it a community thing. It’s definitely raising awareness, and everyone on our team looks forward to it every year. It’s really fun, and it’s great to see the opportunity it gives everyone involved.”

And that’s exactly what Garlatti and his team of organizers set out to do each year with the Autism Awareness Challenge.

“Like it says on the back of every jersey, ‘It’s More Than Just A Game,’” he said. “We know how important it is for the first pitch throwers, some who have been looking forward to this for weeks, to have their chance to get on that mound in front of all the fans and throw out that first ball. We appreciate those coaches who are doing everything they can to make it happen. None of this would be possible without our Teamwork Unlimited Foundation, which

we started a few years ago. We have a board of very hard-working volunteers who work for months to make this event successful. Also Dave Rosenberg and his team of parent volunteers at North Brunswick Baseball and Softball Association for the use of their facility. A big thank you to ID Clothing, the umpires, the AD's, the coaches, the players, the first pitch guests and their families, our volunteers and all who donated and supported our event."

The following schools participated in the Autism Awareness Challenge:

Baseball - East Brunswick Magnet, Plainfield, South Brunswick, Robbinsville, Rahway, South Amboy, Jackson Memorial, St. Joseph's (Metuchen), Middlesex, Gov. Livingston, Spotswood, Livingston, Delbarton, Voorhees, Millburn, South Plainfield, Ramapo, East Brunswick, Randolph, Middletown South, Steinert, North Brunswick, Somerville, Scotch Plains-Fanwood, Sayreville, Elizabeth, South River, Bernards, Edison, Barnegat, Metuchen, Madison, Gill St. Bernard's, Colonia, Red Bank Catholic, Old Bridge, J.P. Stevens, St. Thomas Aquinas, Hamilton West and Monroe.

Softball - Irvington, Wardlaw-Hartridge, JFK Iselin, Colonia, Sayreville, Spotswood, North Brunswick, Edison, South Amboy, Highland Park, J.P. Stevens, Linden, South Brunswick, Metuchen, East Brunswick, Woodbridge, Carteret, Piscataway, Middlesex, Perth Amboy, East Brunswick Magnet, Rahway, Timothy Christian, South River, Perth Amboy Magnet, Woodbridge Magnet, St. Thomas Aquinas, Monroe, Calvary Christian, Piscataway Magnet.

