



*Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Miracle League of Joliet played six-week seasons in the spring and fall with 12 teams playing two-inning games each Saturday from 8:45 a.m. to 2:50 p.m.*

Children gather around home plate belting “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” on a hot summer day. The crowd cheers in support of a teenage girl taking her first home run trot around the bases. Players, buddies and coaches alike shake hands and congratulate each other on a game well played.

It’s a typical Saturday afternoon at Miracle League, the special-needs children’s baseball league in Joliet, Ill. At least it was before Covid-19 forced the cancellation of the league’s 2020 seasons.

A unique form of therapy for special needs children, Miracle League’s mission is to make dreams come true for children of all ages and abilities because, as its [mission statement](#) states, “every child deserves a chance to play baseball.” Originally founded in Conyers, Ga. in 2000, Miracle League has expanded to 275 branches throughout the country and has served over 200,000 children and adults.

Sharon Ferro, executive director of the Joliet league, said she and her husband Nick saw a newsreel about Miracle League on TV in 2005 and decided their city could benefit from having their own branch. After building a nearly \$800,000 custom-designed, rubberized turf field in the backfield of the minor league Joliet Slammer’s baseball stadium, Miracle League of Joliet played their first season in 2008 and has since grown to serve over 160 children per season with the help of their volunteers, otherwise known as “buddies,” said Ferro.



Miracle League's handicap-accessible field is located in the heart of historic downtown Joliet, directly behind the Joliet Slammer's minor league baseball stadium and across from the 120-year-old Joliet Central high school.

Miracle League's "buddy system" pairs each player with a volunteer who assists each child both at bat and on the field. Depending on the player's level of mobility, buddies offer anything from simple moral support to more involved assistance like hitting the ball for players and wheeling them around the bases. With every player getting a turn to bat each inning of the two-inning game, Miracle League "removes the physical barriers that keep children with

mental and physical disabilities off the baseball field and lets them experience the joy of America's favorite pastime," according to its mission statement.

In wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, though, Miracle League's mission to give every child the chance to play baseball has been temporarily put on hold to ensure it doesn't interfere with the children's health.

While this cancellation does protect the children from catching Covid-19, its impact goes far beyond physical health. Miracle League is an important form of [socialization therapy](#) for special needs children, said Kristina Gericke, Operations Manager of Miracle League and mother of 14-year-old Mallory, who has cerebral palsy and epilepsy.

She said the season's cancellation has had a substantial impact on players' emotional and social development. "It's been difficult. [Mallory's] not seeing her friends... She's established a really close bond with her players and her coach," Gericke said. "She definitely misses them, but she understands that she wants to keep all of her friends safe."

Taking into consideration the entirety of Miracle League's therapeutic impact, the decision to cancel both the Spring and Fall was a difficult one according to Ferro. After having no choice but to cancel the



Mallory Gericke, 14, has been playing for Miracle League since 2014 after a classmate recommended it to her family.

Photo courtesy of Kristina Gericke

spring season since it fell during the height of the pandemic in Illinois, Ferro said she and the league's reopening committee worked closely with the National Miracle League headquarters, located in Conyers, Ga. to make a decision about the fall season.

Stephanie Davis, program director of the National Miracle League, said the league's headquarters offered the CDC guidelines for youth sports to each of their leagues, while also suggesting they follow the lead of their own state and county. Ultimately, though, Davis said responsibility fell on the individual leagues to decide the best approach for their fall seasons. "We left this decision up to each league, and we felt that each one would make the best decision based on their state, county and parents' input," she said.

Ferro said Miracle League of Joliet had every intention of reopening for the fall season up until just weeks before it was set to begin. Ferro insisted the league needed to "be there for the kids" and give them an opportunity to do something during this time of isolation.

However, as new restrictions were put into place in Illinois mid-summer, Ferro's plans for the fall quickly began to fall apart. In a nearly two-hour-long online meeting on July 27, Miracle League's reopening committee ultimately decided to cancel the season after assessing all the what-ifs and the responsibility the league has to protect its players.

"Because of the children's immune systems being compromised as it is already, we decided we didn't think we would be able to pull [the fall season] off," Ferro said. "We said we would just be safer not to have it this season."

Although Ferro said health was the most important factor in Miracle League's decision, finances also made an impact. After paying off its [Clinton St. playing field](#) a few years ago, Miracle League has been in the process of building and adding new features to its field, Ferro said.



*Miracle League is ready to add a sensory scoreboard to their field, but Executive Director Sharon Ferro said the league is waiting to install the board until every player can safely touch it without the risk of catching Covid-19.*

The league relies on donations and sponsorships to pay for these expenses, some of which were not available to them this year due to the pandemic, Ferro explained. She said that along with the additional cost of Covid-19 related equipment, the financial hardship proved too difficult for Miracle League to overcome this fall. Ferro says she is hopeful these grants and foundation monies will return in the spring, though, with the most exciting opportunity being an ongoing partnership with the Chicago White Sox.

Aside from contributing to the league financially, the White Sox also have offered hands-on activities between Miracle League players and White Sox team members, said Ferro. "Last year, [they] called us and asked if we could send 25 players with their families to their ballpark on a day when nobody was there," said Ferro. The Sox outfitted the children in uniforms and played a three-inning game with White Sox players as buddies, said Ferro. She noted the team was planning to expand the event this year, but due to Covid, the team postponed it to 2021.

Despite the lack of official sponsorships this year, Miracle League did receive an unexpected monetary gift from its families following the cancellation of the spring season, Ferro explained. Since the families already paid their \$45 registration fees prior to the Covid outbreak and subsequent cancellation, Miracle League offered refunds. Unexpectedly, Ferro said the majority of families sent the refund back and asked that the league keep it as a donation. "That was very nice of them to be able to do that because I know for a fact a couple of families that really could have used that money instead," she said.

Overall, Ferro said both families and volunteers have been generally understanding about the seasons' cancellations. Hagan Lange, a freshman at Joliet Junior College who has been volunteering at Miracle League for the past four years, said he supports the cancellation but is looking forward to returning to the field in the spring. "I think they're making the right decision to cancel the fall season," Lange said. "I wouldn't want any of the kids to get sick, since I know they have weaker immune systems."

Even though Gericke said it has been disappointing for the children to be without baseball for an entire year, Miracle League has found other ways to stay connected during this time of separation. Gericke said her daughter Mallory has video chatted some of her teammates and stayed virtually connected with them. The league also has been sending care packages to its players every couple of months, which include coloring books, crayons, stickers and more. Gericke said these packages have been a touching reminder of the connections they have made at Miracle League. "It was a nice way for Mallory to feel like her coaches and her players were still thinking about her and to kind of participate in the season, even though we can't be together on the field," she said.



*Miracle League included a note of encouragement in every care package, advising its players to “count to 10 and let out a big breath” if they were ever feeling anxious and needed to relax.*

Miracle League does hope to be back on the field next spring, although it may look a lot different than usual. Ferro said depending on the state of Covid-19, the league may have to revise its buddy system and replace outside volunteers with family members in order to limit contact. Lange said he would understand if buddies were not allowed on the field but hoped he would be able to support the players from the stands. “I miss feeling the energy of all the kids,” he said. “Even if I can’t be out there playing baseball with them, the least I can do is show my support from the stands.”

Lange is not the only one who misses the excitement and joy of Miracle League. Ferro said families have stayed in close contact with the league and shown their gratitude for the opportunities the league has provided them. “We get emails all the time saying we miss you,” she added.

Gericke noted that even as a parent she misses working with the league. “I miss interacting with the parents and the players and seeing the kids out there smiling and playing,” she said. But Gericke says the people who miss the league the most are the players, adding “Mallory misses when they cheer for her when she gets a home run.”

Even though Covid-19 is postponing these children’s’ dreams of playing baseball together, everyone involved in Miracle League is a fighter. They will not let Covid shake their spirit, and when the league is finally ready to return in the spring, the sun will be shining brighter than ever,

the home runs will be even sweeter and the joyous serenade of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" will be louder than ever.