

Districts 55 & 68 Little League Baseball “Challenger” Division

In 1989 Little League Baseball established the Challenger Division of Little League, a program for youngsters with mental and/or physical disabilities. The typical disabilities include developmental delays, Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, etc.

Established in 1991, the Challenger Division of Little League in south Orange County has grown steadily. In 2015, over 300 youngsters throughout south Orange County will participate on Challenger teams from District 55 (Lake Forest, Newport Beach, Northwood, & Rancho Niguel) and District 68 (Ladera Ranch, Rancho Mission Viejo, Rancho Santa Margarita, & San Clemente). The regular season ends on May 17 with a “Closing Day Games” celebration, bringing together all the teams from all the leagues in Districts 55 and 68. Off season participation will include the “Challenger Classic” at Angels Stadium in early November, where 40 Challenger teams from various counties will play on the field at Angel Stadium.

The Junior Division Challenger teams, for youngsters age 5-12, play a 10 game schedule, 5 home, 5 away, usually scheduled between Major Division Little League games. The games average two innings, with each player batting each inning. Some hit off the tee, some hit a ball pitched by the coach. No score is kept. The emphasis is on fun, and on the opportunity to learn skills. Parents and fans cheer for both teams throughout the game.

An important part of the Junior Division Challenger program is the "Buddy" system, whereby Little League players (usually ages 11 and 12), in uniform, are paired one-on-one with the Challenger players throughout the game, cheering them on, encouraging them, helping out where needed, and, in general, helping the players have a good time. The “Buddy” system also involves Middle School and High School volunteers who play an essential role as “buddies” during weekly practice sessions.

The Challenger Division also includes the newly formed Senior League Challenger teams, for players with developmental disabilities in Junior High, High School, and beyond. There is no upper age limit. Their schedule is similar to the Junior Division, with a few minor rule changes to emphasize advanced skills and game awareness.

For more information, contact Dr. Darrell Burnett, Assistant District Administrator, Challenger Division, California District 55 Little League, and District 68 Little League. (949) 495-3444. Email: djburnettphd@yahoo.com.