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Game day a slam dunk for buddies, pals

Fast Break gives players a rare chance to enjoy the spotlight

BY MARY ANNE ROSS
Correspondent

More than 200 friends, family members, East Brunswick officials and other fans came out to cheer on the players at a unique event Saturday, the inaugural "My Buddy My Pal" basketball game day.

The Fast Break Basketball Association's Buddy Division, started four years ago in East Brunswick, set up the game at Chittick Elementary School, Flagler Street. Players in the Buddy league, and their pals, as the volunteers are called, have practiced every Saturday since the season started in December.

Saturday's game day was their chance to show off their competitive spirit and newly learned skills.

"We offer disabled kids and young people a chance to learn the game and feel good about themselves," said program director Ward Byrne, whose son, Sean, plays in the division.

There are 57 players, or buddies, and more than 80 pals affiliated with the program.

"These kids have CP [cerebral palsy], autism and Down syndrome ... really any kind of syndrome. We have been working with some of them for four years. When they first started, a lot of them couldn't [bounce] the ball to



Frank Harris charges onto the court, ready to play ball at the inaugural "My Buddy My Pal" game day, organized by the Fast Break Basketball Association Saturday at Chittick Elementary School in East Brunswick.

SCOTT FRIEDMAN

the court," Byrne said.

Fans watching the game might find that hard to believe.

Players were dribbling the ball, passing and making shots — lots of shots. The final score was

40-35. Occasionally a player would break from the pack to give a mom sitting on the sidelines a hug, and sometimes the ball was dropped in the wrong basket, as happens in any youth league, but

none of that mattered to the audience, which celebrated each well-done play and point scored.

Arielle Harris, 17, Jeff Henry, 15, Jon Alba, 15, and Drew Agey, (Continued on page 18)

Buddy ball

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15, are among the pals. Jeff and Jon were announcers for the game, spurring the fans on with their commentary. They had the crowd counting down the seconds left as players determinedly tried to sink the ball.

Jeff, who attends East Brunswick High School, has been a pal since the program started.

"It's been great helping these kids learn," he said. "We do drills with them, and they have improved so much."

"I was surprised at their competitive drive and spirit," said Jon, a ninth-grader at Churchill Junior High School.

Drew, also a ninth-grader at Churchill, was working as scorekeeper during the game.

"We are able to teach them so much," he said.

The results are beneficial to both buddies and pals.

"These volunteers get a real sense of accomplishment from their work," said David McAleer, co-director of the program. "They get up at 8:30 every Saturday morning to come out and help. Some get involved because they want to meet the community service requirements for their schools, but then they stay way past that."

Pals do more than just teach skills.

"We protect them during the game to keep them from getting hit by the ball or by an elbow. They end up telling me about what's going on in their lives," Arielle said. "We give them support."

Fast Break Basketball Association President Howard "Howie" Alexander saw an example of that just prior to the start of Saturday's game.

"One of the players was so afraid to go out on the court that he started to cry. I had one of his pals go over and speak to

him. The two talked, and his pal gave him a hug," Alexander said. "The kid went out and scored six points. He was just beaming. That's what this is all about."

Fast Break Basketball, which is privately run by volunteers, was started 12 years ago with 20 kids in the league. Now there are 1,100. The league has basketball programs for children in four divisions, Buddy being one of them.

"The mayor and the township have always been supportive of us," Alexander said. He was not surprised that Mayor William Neary and Township Council President Catherine Diem came to Saturday's game to root for the buddies and their pals. Council Vice President Ed Luster, a former trustee for Fast Break, served as photographer during the game.

Alexander is hoping the Buddy division will keep growing.

"This is the best-organized and most well-run league in the area," said Gail Nemeth, of Monroe. Her son, David, has been playing for two years. "It's a chance for them to be in the spotlight, which is something they don't get very often."

Game day did provide each player with his or her 15 minutes of fame.

Stadium music blasted as each player was introduced, stepping through an arch covered with balloons and walking down an aisle between two lines of pals. Some ran through with their arms raised triumphantly; others were more tentative and needed encouragement. All received enthusiastic applause from the audience. And if that was not enough, the St. Bart's Buffalos Pop Warner Buddy cheerleaders took to the court twice to inspire the teams and stir up the crowd.

Linda Bocian of South River, whose son David, 16, has Down syndrome, noted his progress and, furthermore, the number of friends he's made through the league. She has seen an improvement in her son and his teammates.

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Frank Garafalo and son Frank Jr., of East Brunswick, share a happy moment during the "My Buddy My Pal" game day, organized by the Fast Break Basketball Association Saturday at Chittick Elementary School in East Brunswick.



SCOTT FRIEDMAN

Scott Hardy fires off a jump shot during the game on Saturday.

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"A lot of them didn't have any concept of the game when they started," she said.

Some parents have noticed an improvement in other areas.

"This helps her communication skills, and she is having a lot of fun," John Cito said of his daughter, Jessica, 10, of East Brunswick.

Byrne said basketball is a great tool for teaching social and communication skills as well as coordination. A math teacher by day at the Collier High School in Marlboro Township, Byrne has developed much of the curriculum used in the league.

"We have been at this for four years, so we have learned a lot about what works and what doesn't," he said, noting that he

is eager to share what he has learned with other towns.

Alexander thinks it might go further.

"This could be a model program that can be used all over the country. It's just all about the kids," he said.

Fast Break Basketball and its Buddy Division are always looking for corporate sponsors, as well as more players. Anyone interested in getting involved should call Ward Byrne at (732) 390-7625. The league Web site is www.fastbreakbasketball.org.

Also, the St. Bart's Buffalo Pop Warner football team will be starting a Buddy Division in the fall, and the Buddy cheerleaders are looking for more members. Anyone interested in joining the team or the cheerleaders can visit the Web site at www.st-bartsbuffalos.com or call (732) 613-8811.