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Rays give kids big league experience

Cantu, Hollins play ball at Challenger League clinic

By Jared S. Hopkins / MLB.com



Damon Hollins (left) helps instruct a child from the Clearwater and Azalea Challenger Leagues. (Skip Milos/Devil Rays)

ST. PETERSBURG -- Nearly 200 baseball fans, including about 100 disabled kids, gathered at Tropicana Field on Saturday to play ball and meet the Devil Rays.

The second-annual Challenger League Baseball Clinic was held to provide physically and mentally challenged kids with an opportunity to get together and play baseball with Major League players. For several hours, kids ran the official 90-foot baselines, hit balls to each other, and talked the trade with Rays infielder Jorge Cantu and outfielder Damon Hollins.

Cantu, who has been on a tear recently with three home runs and six RBIs in his last two games, said he was able to put baseball out of his mind and focus on helping the kids have a good time. He said he gets a warm feeling giving hugs to the children and making them smile.

"My brain turns off; I'm not thinking about baseball when I am here," he said in between signing autographs and posing for pictures.

The Clearwater and Azalea Challenger Leagues are baseball leagues for mentally and physically challenged kids between the ages of five and 23. The Azalea League, which has about 65 kids, had nearly half its league at Tropicana Field.

"It's cool," said Daniel Mumma, 6, whose birthday was Saturday. "The field has lots of rooms. There are long lines."

Daniel's father, David, echoed similar sentiments from the parents.

"It's an incredible experience for the children," he said.

Kathie Fulmer, whose husband Lee is vice president of the Azalea League, said the clinic is successful because disabled kids are usually ignored in mainstream sports leagues.

"This is center stage for them," volunteer Pat Carlson said.

The two Rays were joined by the Devil Rays Wheelchair Softball team, a group of twelve disabled individuals who play competitive softball across the country. The Devil Rays are sponsoring the team, along with several other groups, including the Paraplegic Veterans of America. About 10 other Major League clubs sponsor softball teams for disabled athletes. A national championship of MLB-affiliated softball teams is scheduled for September in the parking lot at Shea Stadium.

The softball players were as excited about the children having fun as the kids themselves.

"To see the smiles on every kid's face, it's awesome," said Tommy Krizka, a 20-year veteran of wheelchair softball.

At one point, Cantu borrowed a wheelchair and tried moving around in it.

"It's tough," said Cantu. "These guys are really strong."

Daniel McKenna, a member of the softball team who also works as a preschool teacher, said all young kids, regardless of disability, treat challenged adults without judgment.

"They ask you, why do use [a wheelchair], and then you tell them and that's the end of it," he said.

Hollins, who made a diving catch in Friday's loss to the Marlins, said such things pale in meaning in comparison to the clinic.

"That's my job," he said. "This is me having fun, this is enjoyable. To see the expression on their faces -- they're having a ball."

Shelton Mobley, one of the wheelchair softball players, said the clinic and Challenger League brings similar people together.

"It allows everyone to play," he said. "You don't just watch and wish you could play. You actually play. Every sport should have a league that separates [disabled athletes] from the masses."

Jared S. Hopkins is a contributor to MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.