

Deaf kids get their turn at bat with camp

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Baseball practice was almost over when Doug Silverstein pointed the kid out to Lou Marino.

"That's him over there, with his mom," the Sherman Oaks Little League coach said. "He wants to learn how to pitch, so work with him a little, will you, Lou? He's a great kid.

"Oh, by the way, he's deaf."

In 40 years of helping coach youth baseball, Marino had never worked with a deaf child. How could that be, he wondered.

He had stood on baseball mounds all over the Valley teaching thousands of young kids how to pitch, but never one who was deaf. Where were they? Baseball was the perfect sport for them.

And that's exactly what Lou Marino told 9-year-old Spence Montan as his mother, Barbara, signed the words for him.

"This game was meant for you, son," Lou began. "See that catcher? What's he doing? He's signing with the pitcher.

"See the third base coach? What's he doing? Giving signs to the batter and the runner. What's the umpire do all game? Make signs with his hands and arms. Do you understand what I'm trying to say, son?"

A broad smile broke out on Spence's face as he turned from his mom to look up at Lou. He shook his head up and down. Yeah, he understood.

Baseball was meant for deaf kids.

And that's how Silent Knights was born. A baseball camp for deaf kids that is taking place today on the baseball field at California State University, Northridge, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Spence, who is 15 and now a junior pitcher on the Burbank High School varsity baseball team, will be there to work with CSUN head baseball coach Steve Rousey and some of his players.

They'll be showing dozens of deaf and hearing-impaired youth from all over Southern California that baseball was meant for them.

Barbara Montan, who teamed with Lou to take the Silent Knights from dream to reality, will be there, too.

It's the second camp in a grand plan that will have individual Silent Knights baseball teams of deaf kids and a sibling play against regular youth baseball teams in tournaments across Southern California.

A few weeks after Lou gave Spence that pitching lesson six years ago, he ran into Barbara and asked how her son was doing.

She gave him a hug and told him her son's self-esteem had gone through the roof since that day. He wasn't "Spence, the deaf kid" anymore. He was "Spence, the baseball pitcher."

"I started crying," Lou said. "That night I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking, why hadn't I seen more deaf kids all those years of coaching?"

"The next morning I started calling around to other coaches and none of them remembered coaching a deaf kid. It wasn't right."

With the help of his Northridge/Chatsworth Rotary Club and CSUN's National Center for Deafness, Lou and Barbara formed the Silent Knights, a name thought up by Spence's older brother, Nils.

Spence had been lucky. He had proactive parents who made sure their son had every opportunity other kids had in the classroom and on the sports field.

Maybe there weren't more deaf kids to coach because their parents didn't have the time, resources, know-how or whatever, to give their children the same opportunities.

Maybe what they needed was some help to learn what Barbara and Lou had with Spence - that success on the baseball field translated into success in the classroom. That high self-esteem is a powerful weapon.

The Silent Knights could certainly help teach them that.

It's ironic, says CSUN baseball coach Rousey, but what the Silent Knights taught him is that kids who can't hear listen better than kids who can.

"Kids today are great multitaskers with all the technological gadgets they have, but what they don't do well is bear down on one thing for a long time," he says.

"The Silent Knight kids bear down and listen to what you're trying to teach them, and that makes a coach very happy."

As a young boy, Spence figured he'd never have the opportunity to go much beyond playing Little League because so few deaf kids have gone on to play at higher levels.

But he's revised his dreams upward. He knows there's a major leaguer named Curtis Pride who is deaf, and he's been reading about a deaf professional player called Dummy Hoy, who had a great career in the late 1800s.

"I know now I can play high school baseball and, hopefully, college baseball, too," the left-handed pitcher said. "So anything's possible.

"That's all my mom, Mr. Marino and everyone helping with Silent Knights are trying to show people - that deaf kids can play baseball, too."

Because this game was meant for them.

Dennis McCarthy's column appears Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday.

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