

Bowling

1999

Bowling league combines fun and therapy

■ **The Spirited All-Stars league gives children a chance to exercise — and make new friends.**

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LARGO — The last eight lanes are overflowing with people: kids, parents, grandparents, teachers, a Boy Scout, a physical therapist. Curls of smoke mix with the din of crashing pins and whizzing bowling balls.

Finally, it is Alison Irwin's turn. She

has been waiting. She lumbers up to the lane, ball in tow, a slight limp in her step. Her cerebral palsy and vision problems don't prevent her from setting up the ball and hurling it down the lane.

"Come on ball, COME ON ball," the 7-year-old shrieks, coaching the ball down the lane. The ball hesitates, then finds its mark. It's a strike.

The idea for the Spirited All-Stars bowling league, which mixes children of differing ages and physical and mental challenges, originated in part from physical therapist Scott Malone, 32, who works at All Children's Hospital in

St. Petersburg and in Pinellas County schools.

"When I was a kid, I was exposed to all sports," said Malone, who said he wanted to be a pediatric physical therapist since he was 16. He wants all children to have the same opportunities to have fun and to make friends as he did.

He brought the children together on baseball and softball teams where he watched them grow socially and physically. Malone said the bowling league provides opportunities for the children to learn new skills and have fun, as well as play indoors in the

summertime despite hot or rainy weather.

"I don't want them to know it's therapy," he said.

From the look on many of the children's faces, they don't.

Alison's grandmother, Ruth Irwin, said participating in sports has helped her granddaughter grow.

"She goes out and does things she wouldn't normally. It doesn't make her feel like she's different from everybody," Irwin said.

Malone said bowling is a sport for everyone — part of the reason he

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Special education teacher Jill Ceciro helps Sarah Siesel, 14, use a special bowling chute. Ceciro teaches at Osceola Middle School and volunteers with the Spirited All-Stars. She says that what the youngsters learn with the Spirited All-Stars will help them in school.



Times photo — SCOTT KEELER



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Jeffrey Lenz, who has cerebral palsy, celebrates with his dad, Tom Cork, after rolling a strike during a recent outing of the Spirited All-Stars bowling league at Largo Lanes.

"It's a good social outing," she said. "A lot of these kids don't have a close group of friends."

It's obvious Daniel, 10, has made some new ones. "I like my team," he said.

Jill Ceciro, a special education teacher at Osceola Middle School, volunteers to hang out with the team. She said the kids learn skills like team spirit.

"I know that's going to roll back into the classroom," she said. Ceciro also brings her own children to the alley.

"It helps them see other facets of the community," Ceciro said. "This gives them the opportunity to see these kids are just like everybody else."

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decided to introduce it to these children. Using chutes, people who cannot bend or who are seated in wheelchairs can push a ball down a metal ramp onto the lane. A special stick is available for those who need some extra strength in their push.

Bowling balls with retracting handles make bowling possible for people who can't grasp the ball using its holes.

Also, Largo Lanes, 1015 West Bay Drive, is equipped with ramps rather than steps from the walkway down to the lanes. Only one seat is placed in front of the scoring equipment so a wheelchair can roll by on either side.

Co-owner Patti Smith said she and her husband decided to make the lanes accessible to all people a few years ago. Since then, the national wheelchair bowling tournament has been held twice at the Largo alley.

When 9-year-old Brittnay Johnson's ball crashed into several pins, she turned to her grandmother and jumped for joy. Brittnay also has cerebral palsy and has undergone five surgeries. But her enthusiasm overwhelms her symptoms. The only thing she thinks about now is having a good time.

"It's fun," she said with a grin. "You might win."

Creating opportunities for children such as Brittnay and Alison began with Ginger Patricks.

Patricks' son Francis Benjamin, who has Tourette's syn-

drome, was not permitted to play on a T-ball team several years ago. The illness, a rare neurological disorder, can cause involuntary muscle movements, grimacing and yelping.

Patricks said what the team lacked was understanding.

"When people take the time to understand a child with all the packaging and accept them, things can work," she said.

Patricks said all children are welcome to join the league, whatever their disability or ability. The cost is \$35, but sponsors have made it possible to waive the fee in certain circumstances. She added that children who join the league can play up to 10 games at the lanes every day.

Linda Jones said the league provides exercise and friendship for the participants as well. Her son Daniel also has cerebral palsy and other coordination difficulties.