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Hunterdon County Democrat

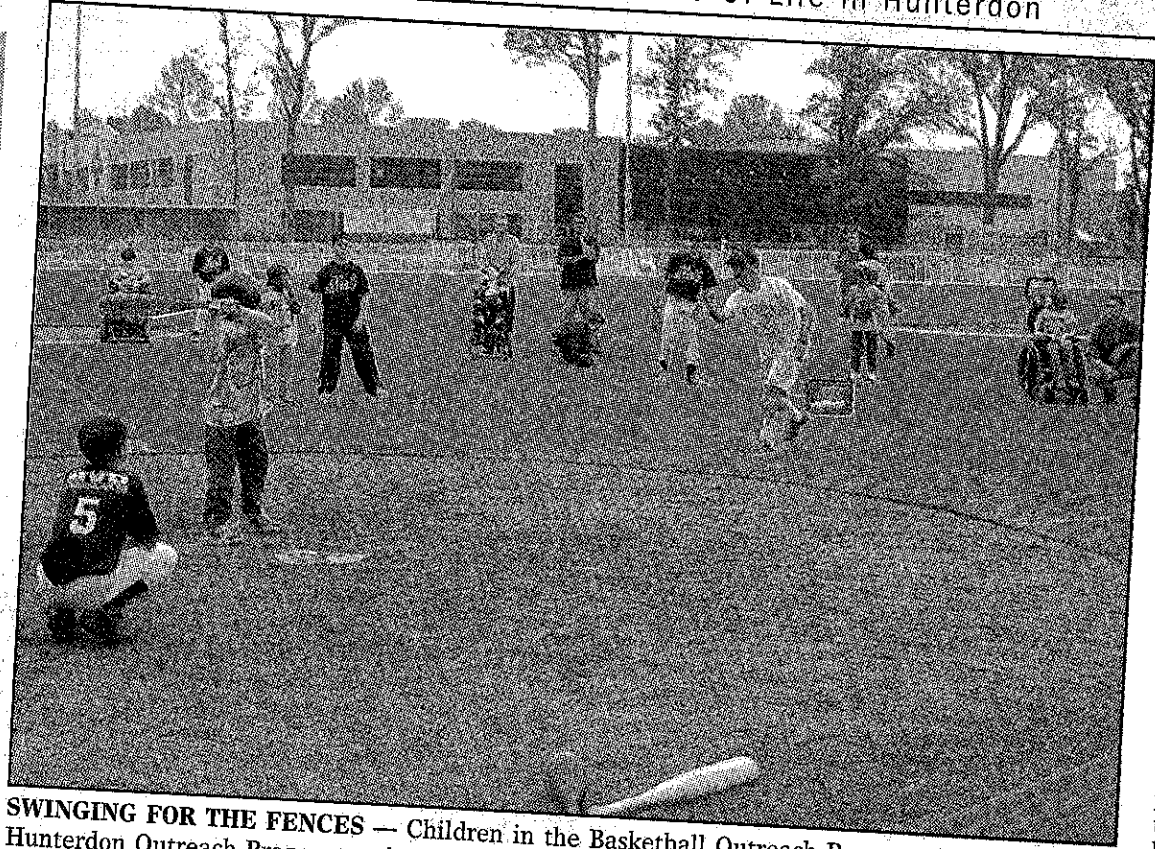
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2004

A Slice Of Life In Hunterdon

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Sports Group Gives Kids Chance To Play

By Paul French Jr.

Hunterdon Outreach Programs are doing just that — reaching out to Hunterdon children with disabilities, giving them the chance to participate in activities for which they wouldn't normally be recruited.

The outreach programs got their start about a year and a half ago with TOPSoccer (The Outreach Program for Soccer). The popularity of that program has brought the addition of 2 new sports programs. A Basketball Outreach Program, BOP, started during the winter 2003-04 season. And Challenger Baseball, which was having trouble continuing its program, joined recently.

Hunterdon Central senior Laura Irwin has headed the basketball program since its inception. Her father Dave Irwin, a TOPSoccer helper and Readington Township soccer coach whose son is disabled, has used his experience with the soccer program to take over Challenger Baseball.

The newly formed Hunterdon

Outreach Programs pull all these activities under one umbrella.

"We are today where we thought we would be in 5 years," said Dan Hendi of Raritan Township, a club officer of the Greater Flemington Soccer Club that started TOPSoccer in Hunterdon.

Hunterdon Outreach uses the volunteer base developed through the soccer program to support each of the programs. Mr. Hendi said the accessible volunteers along with connections first laid down by TOPSoccer have allowed Hunterdon Outreach to grow.

"We don't want them to lose the dream," said Mr. Hendi of attempts to expand Hunterdon Outreach. "It's easy to be bogged down by a lack of volunteers and excess paperwork."

Talks have begun to start an ice hockey program and expand Hunterdon Outreach beyond sports and invites speakers to give lectures.

SWINGING FOR THE FENCES — Children in the Basketball Outreach Program (BOP), a part of Hunterdon Outreach Programs, take their swings on a recent weekend afternoon at the Jack Cust Baseball Academy in Raritan Township. Hunterdon Outreach received a resolution officially acknowledging its programs on Saturday night at a gala to honor challenged athletes and the volunteers who assist them, held at the Flemington Elks.

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