

unplugged

no child left on his behind

For the thousands of kids who are not top hitters, scorers, runners or kickers, Rich Pilardi has a game for you.

BY ROBERTA MINTZ LEVINE

Here's one sports league in which it's part of the game to get called a name. "Bombsaway Baker," aka Brian Baker, a 9-year-old from Ross Township, says he earned the nickname "cause I throw 'em far and I'm accurate." He's proud that people called The Vikings—his Backyard Flag Football Team—"The Undefeated Champions" in the season that ended in January, and he'll quickly recite the aliases of some of his teammates: "The Monster, Rocket, Trevor-oh-so-Clever, Mad Max Russo...."

It's all part of the fun built into the **Backyard Flag Football League**, an all-inclusive youth sports league founded by Rich Pilardi and his wife, Sandra, of Ross in 2003. Pilardi says he was an athletic kid, but his father was tough on him and would pull him

out of baseball games if made a mistake. His experience clearly fueled his passion for this league, which promotes the principles of good sportsmanship, team play, safety and, most important, a chance for everyone to participate.

"Kids have a lot of fun with it," says Pilardi, who gained experience as a volunteer at NFL Flag Football League in Greenfield and Overbrook, and whose two

sons play in the league. "It teaches kids the right attitude about playing with one another and in a league." And to have fun with this game, he says, "You don't have to be a great athlete."

Bombsaway's dad, Jay Baker, echoes Pilardi's inclusive stance. "With flag football, everybody gets to play," he says. Baker, who has coached teams since the league began, says, "There's a lot you can do to get everyone involved." Kids' strengths are applauded—there's a place for the fast runner, the good defender, the accurate passer. And everybody gets to handle the ball.

The Backyard Flag Football League was originally set up as a neighborhood league, "as a way to pass the very dead of winter," recalls Baker. "It was a really snowy year, and the kids had a blast. They played on snow with temperatures as low as 2 degrees. Everybody had a really good time."

Word got around, and last season the league had more than 450 players—with kids coming from Bridgeville, Saxonburg and Zellenople.

Unlike regular football, flag football holds practices only once a week; games are held simultaneously on Sundays in Ross. During the games, every child gets a chance to play. Fun and morale boosting are built into the way the league is operated: Player of the Week medallions are awarded to kids for all types of accomplishments, from sportsmanship and good listening to teamwork and skill. Positive values are reinforced in a speech Pilardi makes before games each week; a weekly newsletter describes a game of the week; and all the kids are given nicknames.

A recent banquet attended by 370 people included the induction of players to a Hall of Fame, chosen for great team spirit and positive team attitude. "I try to give out as many trophies as possible," Pilardi says. When all is said and done, every kid receives a trophy. The league sends out birthday cards and get-well cards—even balloons if a child is hurt. The organization also has evolved in its offerings—with ultimate dodgeball during July and August, then kickball, and for September, there's a plan for wacky wiffle ball—and the league is now called Backyard Sports. "I want to see kids having a good time," Pilardi says. For information, call 412/318-4557 or visit backyardflag-football.com.



Eight-year-old Michael Carr Jr. (right) runs the ball as other youngsters go for his flag. Kids 6 to 15 participate in flag football, kickball, dodgeball and wiffle ball through an organization created by Rich and Sandra Pilardi.

The Pilardis (above) created the Backyard Sports League to give kids (including their two sons) the opportunity to play sports for fun, without the time and financial commitments of other recreational sports.

PHOTOS: ELLIOTT CRAMER

