

# THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA REGISTER

## No losers on this field

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Melinda Gutierrez swings the bat and hits the softball with a smile on her face, pride in her heart and the love of some very good people.

Gutierrez charges toward first base where not just one but two girls are playing the bag. She rounds second while the ball rolls untouched in the outfield. She pauses at third as a fielder picks up the ball and throws it toward the infield.

Then, Gutierrez sees a chance and bolts for home.

The middle-aged man who has been pitching to the young women approaches the plate, the ball in his glove. He reaches out toward

Gutierrez.

"Safe," Doug Mansfield shouts, missing Gutierrez by inches and smiling the biggest smile on the field.

Make that the second biggest. Gutierrez, 27, is beaming.

This is no regular softball game. Everybody on or near the field is smiling. That includes the girls who are playing; the girls assisting (*that* team rotates weekly), the parents.

There are no losers today. Not on this field. And maybe not ever, or at least as long as Mansfield is around.

The unusual softball team was born nine years ago when Bruce Sanborn watched his daughter and other special needs girls playing coed ball in Little League's Challenger division and decided the girls needed something different.

It wasn't that Challengers wasn't great. It was – and is. I went to a few games several years ago with my wife, a special education aide, to cheer on a young man with numerous brain surgeries. Andrew taught me to laugh and cry at the same time.

But as Sanborn watched his girl and others in Challenger games, he discovered the brawny boys' strength and size intimidated the girls, many of whom were young adults. With the help of the Laguna Niguel Girls Softball league, he created a new team and named it CHAMPS, for "challenged mentally and physically." Six years later, Sanborn moved on and his assistant coach, Mansfield, stepped up to the plate.

To be more accurate, Mansfield's entire family stepped up. His wife, Lisa, assists. So do the couple's two daughters, Cebрина, 16, and Chelsae, 18, who has been inspired to become a special-education teacher.

The Mansfields did this even though there are no special needs kids in the family; no relatives who need help. Their motivation is a connection to community.

"I get a kick out of it," said the Laguna Niguel architect. "I love softball. I love the game. I love the kids."

His philosophy is pretty simple: "Use as little adult help as possible." And the focus is on fun.

But Mansfield has a dream that extends beyond the field which, on a recent Saturday, happened to be at Niguel Hills Middle School.

"The dream is to have several CHAMPS teams, and the teams could all play each other."

How do others explain the Mansfield family's selfless help?

"They are good, kind people," said Sharon Berg of Mission Viejo, as her daughter, Ashley, 24, grinned and waved from third base.

"He does it truly from the heart," said Rose Gutierrez, Melinda's mom.

"He pushes the girls a little bit and they get an idea what they're capable of."

When Melinda joined Mansfield's team a few years ago, she could only hit off a batting tee. Now, Melinda whacks Mansfield's pitches.

Both Ashley Berg and Melinda also have learned to chase after balls. This came only after Coach Doug coaxed them to try, week after week; his keys being patience and small steps.

The Gutierrez family, which includes three normally functioning boys, discovered their beautiful baby girl had brain damage when Melinda was four months old. The diagnosis came as a shock, detectable only by a doctor testing the infant's reflexes. The cause has never been determined.

As Melinda grew older, she was diagnosed with epilepsy and cerebral palsy. She suffered seizures and, until very recently, was non-verbal.

If you know people like Melinda Gutierrez, you know that certain colors can bring tears to your eyes — blue skin; purple lips; the colors of a person having a seizure. The worst part is you don't know how the seizure will end, or if paramedics will arrive in time.

After six years without a seizure, thanks in part to medication, Melinda was seizure free – until Sunday night, just a day after she'd been happily playing softball.

"We thought we might lose her," Rose Gutierrez said, sucking in her breath.

Melinda recovered, and by Monday afternoon she was herself. Such is life for some special families; you learn to get through the seemingly impossible times, and celebrate life's small accomplishments.

Like running the bases with Coach Doug.

David Whiting's column appears on the Front Page on Fridays, Sundays and Wednesdays and in Sports on Tuesdays. If you have an idea, contact him at [dwhiting@ocregister.com](mailto:dwhiting@ocregister.com).