



## PARTNERS IN PLAY

A BASKETBALL LEAGUE SCORES POINTS WITH SPECIAL-NEEDS KIDS AND THE BUDDIES WHO GUIDE THEM.



Jeremy Frazier, 13, left, of the Challenger Division talks basketball with his buddy, Zachary Friesen, 13.

BY DANIEL LANGHORNE • STAFF WRITER

Sean Boots puts on his basketball shirt, shorts and sneakers hours before his Saturday morning practices and scrimmages in Yorba Linda.

He's so excited to hit the court that his father, Dave, has to remind the 13-year-old with Down syndrome that it's not quite time yet.

Sean Boots is one of 36 children and young adults who learn basic basketball skills from volunteers each week at the Thomas Lasorda Jr. Field House with Yorba Linda Basketball's Challenger Division, a league designed for players with special needs. The membership has doubled since last year.

Dave and Sean Boots have been involved with the Challenger Division since it was started in 2009.

"I just get choked up knowing where it came from and seeing how far it's come," Dave Boots said.

John Christensen, founder and director of the Challenger Division, said the work with these children with special needs wouldn't be possible without volunteers from Anaheim's Esperanza and Servite high schools over the years. The "challengers" have been partnered with a "buddy" from one of the high schools to coach and keep them focused on drills.



PHOTOS: MINDY SCHAUER, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jacob Cid, 10, gains some height for a dunk with a lift from Michael LaCilento, 15, at the Thomas Lasorda Jr. Field House.

Challenger Division's members through the years

15  
2009

17  
2010

14  
2011

16  
2012

18  
2013

36  
2014

Source: John Christensen

# LEAGUE

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"It wouldn't work without the buddies because they need someone to direct them and get them to where they need to go," Christensen said.

John Morris, Servite's basketball coach, was introduced to the Challenger Division by the family of one of the players, senior Cesar Delgado. After one visit to watch the drills and scrimmage, he knew he wanted to get his players involved.

Even during this season's playoffs, win or lose, Morris wanted his players helping out at the Field House.

"I think we gain more from going than they would from having a practice on Saturday," Morris said.

Morris doesn't make volunteering with the Challenger Division mandatory for his team. He said that would defeat the purpose. Servite tries to teach its students the importance of serving God by giving back to their community, Morris said.

Some of the players with special needs have become so fiercely loyal to their buddies that they're paired up week after week. Boots remembers one boy refused to go on the court because his buddy was running late one day.

Anthony Fonseca said his Nate, 15, lives with hyperplasia of the brain, an overgrowth of cells. Nate Fonseca communicates through sign language and learns at a slower pace.

After working with his buddy, Fonseca has progressed from just dribbling once before taking a step to now dribbling about eight times.

"We never though he would be able to do anything like that," Anthony Fonseca said.

Christensen said he was



PHOTOS: MINDY SCHAUER, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**Chastity Meaves, 30, warms up before playing basketball with the Yorba Linda Challengers and their partners, players from local high schools. The division provides those with Down syndrome and autism a chance to learn the sport every Saturday from January through March.**



**Jeremy Frazier, 13, works on his jump shot during Challenger practice.**

inspired by God to start the Challenger Division. It was an unexpected mission after years of coaching his son, Mitch, in youth basketball for years. Christensen had coached Fonseca's older son and regularly saw Nate play on the court in between quarters, giving him

## John Christensen

**City:** Yorba Linda

**Day job:** Principal at Cornerstone Communications

**Claim to fame:** Director of communications for Portland Trailblazers from 1989 to 1999

**Alma mater:** Santa Ana High School

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the idea to start the division.

"It wasn't something I was eager to pursue," Christensen said.

It changed when Christensen saw the players dribbling and making shots with their buddies.

"For me the win is smiles and enjoyment," he said.

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**Challengers and their buddies gather for drills during a recent practice. Yorba Linda Basketball's Challenger Division, in its sixth year of bringing together players with special needs and volunteers from high schools, has 36 players in 2014.**