CENTER VALLEY – As banquets go, this one was different. Larger than most, with some 700 guests, yet typical for a fund-raiser, with a silent auction and other promotions, this dinner had miracles on the menu.

One of 156 such organizations across the country, the Miracle League of the Lehigh Valley offers children with disabilities the chance to play baseball, on a field specially designed with Olympics-grade materials. With the support of volunteer angels in the outfield and buddies on the bases, each uniformed child is announced with professional fanfare, bats at the plate, circles the bases, and scores a run. As you might imagine, everyone wins … perhaps the parents even more than the children.

Still, when the munificent magnate from Greece reminded the dinner guests how this league turns the American dream into reality, I had to wonder: why baseball? What is it about this sport, in particular, that makes miracles possible?

I queried one of the board members, a former big leaguer who coaches locally. He knew the answer experientially, but could not articulate it. He sees it in the children’s smiles, but confessed that understanding it would require a philosopher.

So, with this intellectual at-bat, I’ll take a few swings at elucidating why baseball has such an alluring influence, not just for these children but for us all.

Baseball answers our yearning for more. Philosophers acknowledge that human existence is limited by time and space; even in our imaginations, we can only be in one place at a time. But baseball knows no time; no clock runs out on its play. And its spaces signal what is far beyond, with foul lines extending without end horizontally, and foul (technically, fair) poles reaching to the heavens vertically. The youngsters in the Miracle League are constrained by limitations more severe than
most. Yet they, like us, long to stretch beyond themselves, to share in what is eternal, if only for the time it takes to round the bases.

Baseball focuses attention on “home” as the place where human aspirations come to be realized. As A. Bartlett Giamatti eloquently explains, “baseball is a narrative, an epic of exile and return, a vast, communal poem about separation, loss, and the hope for reunion. … It is the Romance Epic of homecoming America sings to itself.” Miracle Leaguers are far too young to know romance or read epics, yet they undertake with grown-up zeal the trek around their rubberized basepaths. And when they arrive at the plate, it brings everyone “home” to what really matters.

Baseball challenges us to handle pressure, giving a recipe for life. Compared to more static sports, like golf, where navigating the terrain requires silent focus and steely resolve, baseball’s action is constantly shifting, with plays and players ever in motion. There, as Billy Martin once quipped, real pressure is trying to hit a ball moving 90 mph, with a stick smaller in circumference than the ball, while 40,000 people scream at you. Miracle League games are played in a smaller, more congenial environment, but even there children instinctively rise to the challenge and handle the pressure of batting a ball off a tee. Their wide-eyed enthusiasm can help us all to view difficulties as opportunities rather than obstacles.

Baseball entails competition without opposition, providing us with a formula for peace. Football celebrates sacks and tackles, hockey cheers a check into the boards (and other fisticuffs), and basketball has its picks and fouls. But in baseball, opponents are not physically manhandled. Its bang-bang moments generate odd excitement for fans, but play is not dictated by interpersonal force. Miracle League children also thrive on excitement, but they know that, when playing the game, not beating (on) another, is the object, cooperation triumphs over antagonism. Our world could learn a valuable lesson from them.

And baseball celebrates sacrifice, which holds the key to human fulfillment. Sacrifice is peculiar to baseball, the only sport to formally acknowledge its value by conferring statistical recognition upon its completion. Sacrifice reveals the importance of action over personality, of ordinary work over superstar heroics. It celebrates the subjection of personal preferences to the good of the team, and thus constitutes a significant strategy for winning, on a field or in life.

Youngsters stricken by life’s wild pitches can still enjoy America’s game, thanks to the enormous sacrifices of time and treasure made by others. It’s no miracle that the Lehigh Valley supports this league. Just watch a game, and you won’t need any philosophy to see genuine happiness.