

Kicking MS to the curb



Kids and kickball combine to create an annual school-wide fundraising event.

by Kelly Smith

Never underestimate the power of young people coming together to create change.

In the spring of 2013, seventh-graders Hamp Sisson, Liam Powell, Ford Clegg and Parker Garrison—all teammates on their Mountain Brook, Alabama, junior high school's baseball team, the Spartans—were in the dugout. As they waited their turns at bat, the conversation turned to Powell's and Clegg's mothers, who both have multiple sclerosis, and sometimes are unable to attend games.

The group of boys talked about their wish to help the two moms, and before the game ended, Kick MS was born.

Their idea focused on a kickball tournament, with proceeds supporting the National MS Society. Why kickball? "It's a good equalizer," says Sisson, now 15. "Other sports can be more difficult, with equipment and everything, but kickball is a fun thing for everyone to play," he says. The sport is similar to their beloved baseball, except that players kick a ball rather than hit one with bats.



What a kick! This group of former Mountain Brook Junior High School friends, now high schoolers, rallied around the Kick MS cause. They are (from left): Beau Hubbard, Emerson Richie, Brooks King, Richman Priestley, Sibley Powell, Emily Grace Lemak, Ellie Dayhuff and Lily Cochrane. Photo courtesy of the National MS Society

Kicking it off

The group used social media to get the ball rolling and recruit captains. Once they were in place, team captains texted everyone they knew to spread the word and find players—which wasn't too difficult. "People thought it was a fun idea to play kickball and raise money," Powell, now 16, says. "Part of the fun was for teams to design their own T-shirts and team names; they got really creative with that."

That fall, as eighth graders, they organized 16 teams of eight players in their grade. Each team had at least three boys and three girls per team to achieve approximate gender equality. In 2014, the tournament grew to include 28 teams—14 each in the eighth and ninth grades. With hundreds of students involved, it began to feel like a true community gathering united toward a common cause.

Individuals pay a \$25 entry fee to join the tournament; teams then do additional fundraising. "We do any idea you could think of," Powell says, laughing. "Bake sales, car washes, fundraising letters to family; one team collected gift cards, and sold \$5 raffle tickets for the basket of cards."

The boys offer advice for others who are considering starting a similar event:

- Make sure to educate people about what MS is, and how it does—and does not—affect people's lives. You can download educational info from the Society at nationalMSSociety.org/what-is-MS.
- If kickball's not your sport, choose another activity that everyone can enjoy and participate in.
- Communication is critical. Use social media, fliers and word-of-mouth to let people know about the event.
- Offer an incentive. At Mountain Brook, top team and individual fundraisers receive a \$10 iTunes gift card.
- Ask community leaders or local celebrities to participate; this will attract people and publicity.
- Learn more about starting your own fundraising effort at nationalMSSociety.org/DIY.



Hamp Sisson is one of the two founders of Kick MS. Photo courtesy of Leigh Ann Sisson



Liam Powell is the other founder of Kick MS. Powell's mom has MS.

Photo courtesy of Ashley Powell

Rolling along

The tournament quickly gathered steam, with parents helping to provide structure and help with logistics, such as reserving fields, working with vendors and handling the finances.

As the tournament grew, it became a combination fundraiser and back-to-school gathering for the junior high school each August. Each year, the daylong event would fill the school's athletic fields, with local vendors supplying lemonade and food to help with the fundraising. To date, the tournaments have raised \$31,000 to support MS programs and research.

In 2015, the tournament will be held in November and expanded to include seventh-graders. The event also will become the school's official fundraiser—each school in the district chooses a nonprofit to support each year—which means more support with promotions and logistics. National MS Society representatives will speak at the kickoff event and provide educational materials. All proceeds from the tournament will be donated to the Society.

“We are delighted by the initiative of the Mountain Brook Junior High School students in creating a fun event that can be sustained for many years to come,” says Andrew Bell of the Alabama-Mississippi chapter of the Society. “Not only is the event a strong fundraiser, it also helps to generate awareness for our organization and educate the students about MS.”



Having a ball: James Childs, left, and Zach Shunnarah, right, playing at a Kick MS tournament.

Photo courtesy of the National MS Society

The boys say that helping to promote that learning has been a profound experience for them. “If kids across the country could become aware of and help stop MS, we would all be able to live in a world where the worries and pain of this disease are only a past memory,” Powell says. “I am very proud of my friends’ support for my mom and all they have done for MS research through Kick MS. We would like to stop this disease permanently,” he adds.

Sisson says that the tournament showed him the power of “everyone rallying together for a common cause.” Even more, he adds, “This tournament means hope for many people who are diagnosed with MS, so it is very neat to be a part of this awesome fundraiser.”

Bringing it home

The foursome are incoming high-school students this year; they plan to act as consultants to the students at the junior high who are taking the reins, and they will work as ambassadors to other junior high schools to expand the tournament. “Hopefully others around the country will take this kickball tournament model and adapt it to raise money in their local communities,” says Bell. “It’s a fairly simple event to execute and is a lot of fun for all those involved.”

Kelly Smith is a Colorado-based journalist and freelance writer.

To learn more about DIY fundraising, visit nationalMSSociety.org/DIY.