



## ***Prep players ACE a college future through Sox youth baseball program***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
Posted Tuesday, November 26th, 2013*

Kenny Williams always emphasized – and that’s a mild word to describe how he talked up the issue – education first when discussing his White Sox’s Amateur City Elite youth baseball program.

Athletic skills on the diamond, Sox executive vice president Williams reasoned, aren’t worth much unless there’s an educational foundation underneath the player. Better yet, beyond grade point averages, it’s an acquisition of life skills.

So even an elite player like University of Arizona-bound Simeon star outfielder Darius Day can benefit from the nuances that ACE teaches its participants.

“Definitely responsibility and time management,” said Day. “There’s a lot of things that go into trying to be a successful baseball player and then trying to manage school at the same time.

You have to make sure you get schoolwork done and try to take some swings or hit the weight room. Discipline and time management.”

The end result of time spent and lessons learned in the ACE program was on display recently at U.S. Cellular Field. In a packed Conference and Learning Center, the latest crop of ACE players told of how they advanced in life after signing their letters of intent to attend college.

Darius was one of 13 college-bound ACE participants. Others, with their Chicago-area high schools and college destinations listed, were: Christian Bland, Harlan, Purdue Uni-



**University of Arizona-bound Simeon star Darius Day is an enthusiastic backer of the ACE program.**

versity-North Central; David Calderon, Lincoln Way North, Morehead State University; James Davison, Morgan Park, Howard Junior College; Diontrell Earls, Simeon, Purdue University-North Central; Angel Figueroa, Bishop Noll, Black Hawk College; Justin Freeman, Rich Central, Southern University; Kevin Jones, Portage, Northern Illinois University; Anthony Justiniano, Clemente, Wabash Valley College; Adam Kelly, Kenwood, Illinois Central College; Jamal Martin, Morgan Park, Alcorn State University; Lavar Reed, Morgan Park, Hill Junior College, and Rahman Williams, Mt. Verde Academy, University of Michigan.

Through the ACE program, the Sox offer players the opportunity to play baseball against other highly competitive groups on a traveling team. ACE team members (ages 13 to 18) are engaged in an elite practice and competition schedule, while receiving academic direction to prepare them for success both on and off the field.

## **72 ACE alums in college, 11 drafted**

Some 72 alums of ACE have gone to college, usually with financial aid. Eleven have been picked in the June amateur draft.

While the emphasis is on inner-city players, the list of the most recent signees includes products of suburban baseball programs. No matter where they live or their economic situation, ACE players get a boost. Even the 6-foot, 190-pound Day benefited. The speedy left-handed hitting outfielder, who doubled as a pitcher at Public League powerhouse Simeon, has been earmarked for success for years. He was the No. 2 ranked Illinois 2014 prospect and No. 8 overall in the Prep Baseball Report's coverage area.



**ACE director Kevin Coe (left) with Sox pitcher Hector Santiago and the newest crop of ACE college signees.**

“Playing Chicago public school baseball, you don’t really get to go outside Chicago and play in front of who knows who’s watching,” Day said. “Playing in the ACE program, you’re traveling cross country. You’re playing in front of big league scouts and college coaches every game. You’re in front of somebody every game.

“In Chicago, you’re in front of Mom, Dad, this guy and this guy. (Playing on) bad fields. In the ACE program, you’re in good weather, on the West Coast, East Coast, down South, playing in all kinds of better conditions than you have in Chicago. Better fields, better places. Everyone’s watching. It’s up to you to put your career in your hands and perform in front of these people.”

ACE complements Major League Baseball’s two-decade-old RBI Program in providing a baseball outlet for inner-city players. An RBI Program alum who served as a role

model for the ACE players at the signing ceremony was Sox lefty Hector Santiago, a product of inner-city Newark, N.J. Santiago was joined at the ceremony by Sox general manager Rick Hahn; Del Matthews, the team's assistant director of player development and scouting, and ACE director Kevin Coe.

"It's something that I love being around," said Santiago. "I went home to Jersey a couple of weeks ago. Two guys came out of our group and got scholarships to college ball. Being around it growing up and kind of going through what they're going through, (seeing) where they're at, where they're going, where they could be...it's nice.

"I went to a small school hidden in Florida. It doesn't matter where you go, you're going to get seen. As long as you put the hard work and effort into it, it's going to happen."

In addition to the educational foundation taught, the ACE players simply benefit by being able to play in better weather and better playing conditions than endured in Northern climes.

### **Cold-weather players often on their own in workouts**

"Here in Chicago, and Jersey's just as bad, you're lucky if you get four or five months out of it," Santiago said. "There's no fall ball, there's no pre-season baseball. It's a lot more hard work put into it because you've got to do more stuff indoors and on your own, at home. Whether it's throwing the ball up in the air, throwing it up against the couch. That's pretty much what I did. I just kept the ball in my hand, threw it up against the recliner. I (wore) through three or four recliners through the winters."



**Lavar Reed (left) of Morgan Park chats with Sox pitcher Hector Santiago.**

Hahn said the basis of ACE was Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf's desire to level the playing field in life for young people.

"Although the roots of this activity is in baseball, on the field, in reality it's about trying to give people the opportunity to better themselves both on and off the field," said the GM. "And the opportunity to perhaps get seen by scouts or university recruiters who might not otherwise see these players play. The baseball's just a small part of the pride we feel in this.

“To lead to 80-some-odd kids being given the opportunity to go to college that may or may not have had otherwise is something the whole organization takes a great deal of pride and that starts at the top with Jerry.”

Players moving upward through college and hopefully toward the pros need every last edge they can glean from their life’s experiences.

“I think it helps,” Hahn said of the any edge ACE provides. “Part of the development is not just on the field, but off in terms of preparation and approach to the game and approach to balancing studies on top of that. At the end of the day, the credit belongs to these kids. They’re the ones who put themselves in the position to capitalize on the opportunity.”

Bishop Noll’s Angel Figueroa, for one, felt ACE transformed his attitude. He said early on at the Hammond, Ind. high school, the middle infielder was “all about baseball.”

### **‘Grades are important’**

“They broke me down to the reality that grades are important,” he said. “They’d check on our progress reports.”

Pitcher Kevin Jones, of Portage, Ind., had scholarship offers from Purdue and Michigan State before choosing Northern Illinois. He credits his good position to ACE.

“They showed me hard work and dedication pays off a lot,” Jones said. “You’ve got to dedicate yourself to your schoolwork.”

Whether ACE will make a difference in reversing sagging inner-city participation is questionable.

The organization simply cannot change the pace of a “thinking-man’s sport” that requires patience and concentration on the part of the player.

“I think it’s just interest,” Simeon’s Day said. “A lot of people don’t find interest in baseball. It’s a slow game. When things happen, they happen quickly. In basketball, things happen every second. Playing baseball, when things come, they come quickly. They don’t find excitement in watching baseball games because of how slowly it moves.

“The White Sox are doing a great job trying to draw kids in. But it’s solely up to the individual to grasp an interest in playing the game of baseball. It’s not something you can force upon someone to have a passion for. You have to have the desire to get up and play baseball.”



**Ticketed for Northern Illinois, Portage High School's Kevin Jones (left) greets Sox general manager Rick Hahn.**