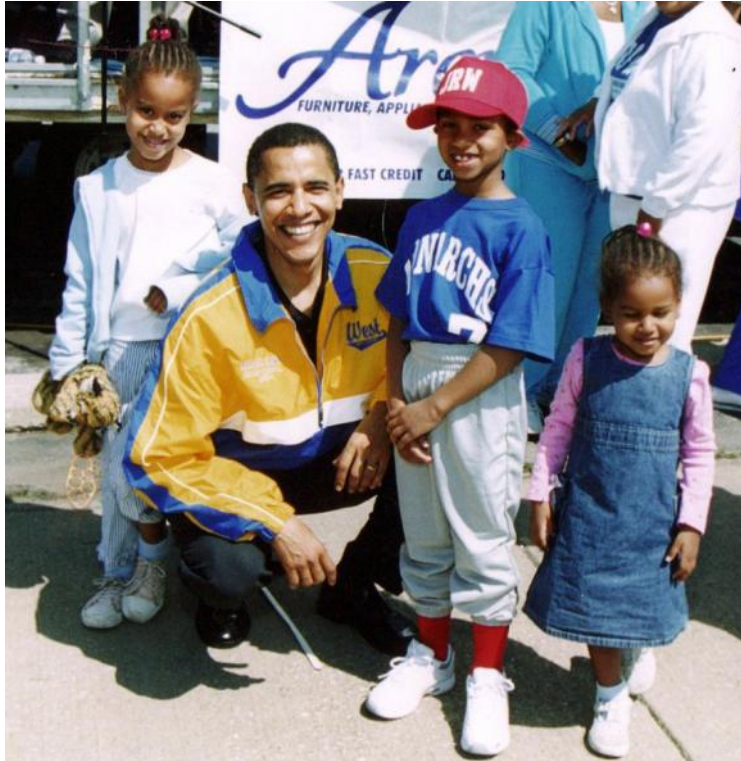


BASEBALL UNDER GLASS



Then-Sen. Barack Obama brought young daughters Malia and Sasha to a Jackie Robinson West Parade in the mid-2000s. If the team advances, a White House ceremony ought to be in order.

Build it, and the kids are coming in droves to Robinson Little League

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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I don't think the late Al Davis copyrighted his longtime Oakland Raiders war cry.

So Chicago's Jackie Robinson West team aiming for the national Little League championship might as well adapt three fighting words:

"Just win, baby!"

The Robinson kids from the far South Side, first Williamsport-bound team from Chicago in three decades, are the feel-baseball good story of the summer so far. And in proving that athletes



George Castle



The late Joseph Haley (left) founded the Jackie Robinson West League in 1971. After his 2005 death, leadership seamlessly transferred to son Bill Haley (right). Photo credits Bill Haley.

growing up in the city can more than hold their own with opponents from finely manicured suburban or small-town fields, they are showing that winning creates its own role model.

All the Major League Baseball RBI programs and seminars and hand-wringing over why inner-city athletes have forsaken baseball for the greater payoffs and publicity of basketball and football obviously have missed the point. Jackie Robinson West proves if you have a dominant – and increasingly glamorous—baseball team of your neighbors, and get on TV regularly, you’ll attract players. Build it and they will indeed come.

“Last year the kids advanced to the Great Lakes tournament and they were on ESPN two or three times,” said Robinson league president Bill Haley. “It’s made a big difference especially with our T-ball and minor leagues. Our numbers are through the roof.

“Last year we had 40 kids in T-ball and this year we had close to 90. We didn’t do anything different with our marketing. We had to go out and recruit more coaches, otherwise we’d have to turn kids away.”

“For us, in our league, there was a direct connection between the team appearing on ESPN and our enrollment numbers going up.”

More growth in numbers expected

But this year’s Great Lakes Region champs are taking interest to a new level. Coming from behind on a grand-slam homer against New Albany, Ind. to qualify for Little League’s Elite Eight is about as dramatic as it gets. That’s how you win friends and influence people.

Robinson league knows winning, politicians' recognition



Players and coaches celebrate (left) the regional victory that sent Jackie Robinson West to the Little League World Series. Team solidarity and spirits were sky-high (center) as the team became the first from Chicago in 30 years to reach Williamsport. Holding up championship banners (right) is now a common task for players.



Public officials have long recognized Jackie Robinson West, ranging from Gov. Pat Quinn (left), Mayor Rahm Emanuel (right in center photo) and Mayor Harold Washington (right) back in the 1980s.

Photo credits Bill Haley

“We expect our enrollment will go up again,” Haley said. “This will cause more kids to give baseball a chance.

“We’re one of the best eight teams in the U.S.”

Somewhere, Joseph Haley, Bill’s father and founder of the league back in 1971, is nodding knowingly. The elder Haley was the guiding light until he died in 2005. But the father-son leadership combo has provided consistency in purpose and philosophy.

The classic Little League model works even in the inner city. Nothing could succeed without parental involvement. Whether they are two-parent families or single-parent households, the moms and dads are involved.

“The parents deserve a lot of credit to reach a level like this,” Haley said.

Haley has some 90 to 100 volunteers with a four-to-five person governing board. All hands are required on deck to run 31 teams in three Chicago parks. Annual budget is \$52,000.

“We don’t make it comfortably, but we do make it,” said Haley. The usual raffles and concession sales raise cash. Local business and churches are sponsors, as are 34th Ward Ald. Carrie Austin and Circuit Court Judge Michael Brown. Back in the day, City Council bigwig Wilson Frost was a stalwart backer.

Mayors, Obama recognize Robinson League

Even higher powers in Chicago know how to back a winner. Mayor Rahm Emanuel showed up at a game a few weeks back. Joseph Haley’s program was well-known enough the kids got invited to City Hall over the decades to take photos with Harold Washington and Rich Daley.

About a decade back, while an Illinois senator, Barack Obama attended a league parade, bringing along then-young daughters Malia and Sasha. If the Robinson kids get to the championship game in Williamsport, a White House visit should be in order since Obama tries to honor any Chicago achiever. A presidential visit would simply spur the gathering momentum for more players joining the league.

There’s precedent for a stop at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. After present-day Mariners Manager Lloyd McClendon slugged five homers for his Gary, Ind. team in Williamsport in 1971, he got to visit the White House and pose with Vice President Spiro Agnew.

The extra publicity and association with big names helps now, as every extra dollar is needed. The team flew from Indianapolis to Williamsport on Aug. 10. But in waiting for the games to begin on Aug. 14, daily expenses of housing, feeding and entertaining the kids mounted. Haley estimated the league would run up at least a \$10,000 travel bill.

“The kids have been on the road 12 consecutive days,” he said of their status traveling to Williamsport.

Money is not the object of participation, anyway. No Jackie Robinson West player is turned away if he cannot afford the \$100 annual participation fee. Sponsors defray those costs.

Too bad Little League rules prohibit Haley and his coaches from recruiting. Jackie Robinson would be swamped by prospective participants from all over the Chicago area. Within the rules, the league is simply better mining the talent in a finite geographical area of the Roseland, Washington Heights and Englewood areas.

From this energized talent pool could come some future baseball producers. Alumni who made it the furthest were outfielders Marvell Wynne, who played on the 1989 NL East champ Cubs; Wes Chamberlain of the Phillies, and Emil Brown, a veteran of five teams starting with the Pirates. Wynne attended Hirsch High School, while Chamberlain went to Simeon and Brown to Harlan.

But it’s not the end result of making big dough in the majors that’s the appeal of the Robinson winners. It’s the pure joy of baseball at its entry point, and selling it to others.

Your friends are outside having fun. You want to join in. That's how baseball always thrived. The Robinson kids are proving the game can grow anywhere where the joy of competition is the lure.

Everybody is catching Jackie Robinson West fever. The White Sox are partnering with Emanuel and the city of Chicago to host a viewing party for the local heroes at 2 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 14, for the game against Lynwood, Wash.

A large video screen will be set up at Jackie Robinson Field (10700 S. Aberdeen). Attendees can enjoy ballpark food and interact with former Sox players and mascot Southpaw. Additional information about the watch party is available at cityofchicago.org.

Each of the 11- and 12-year-olds should come out of the Little League World Series with the title "ambassador for baseball." In the purest sense, they are promoting the game better than any marketing program or seminar could ever do.