‘JRW’ Chicago’s greatest-ever baseball love-in

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We’ve experienced the greatest love-in in the history of Chicago baseball, and we just can’t believe it’s over.

Jackie Robinson West’s run to the national Little League championship, before it finally bowed to South Korea’s size, strength, pitching and defense in a bid for the world title, represented the finest feel-good story in the 150 years we’ve taken baseball seriously in these parts.

Oh, you’d say the 2005 World Series was pretty uplifting, but also consider that half the town was in a collective frown with their Cubbie Blue smarting on that late October night. And none of the other postseason ventures by both the White Sox and Cubs over the past 100 years have left behind fond memories. See 2003, Bartman Game, and 1919, Black Sox.

But the far South Side kids, labeled older and wiser than their 12- and 13-year-old selves by none other than Rahm Emanuel, united White Sox and Cubs fans, non-baseball sports fans and non-fans, period. Who couldn’t relate to a gaggle of budding teen-agers who weren’t supposed to beat stronger aggregations from suburban environs with their well-manicured fields and ample funding? They won friends and influenced people all over the country, who witnessed a hint of the old Negro League style in their dash and verve that created a captivating on-field rhythm for “JRW.”

“The ‘05 World Series was just White Sox fans and some baseball purists,” said ME-TV and WCIU-TV sports director Kenny McReynolds. “These 13 young men have brought the entire city together. They have brought non-baseball fans of all races and religions together as one. I’ve never seen anything like this in my life. Nothing (else) has done this.

“It’s bigger than the ’05 White Sox. It’s bigger than the ’13 and ’10 Blackhawks. It’s bigger than the Bulls’ six championships. Those were sports fans. These kids have brought together people who know nothing about baseball, nothing about sports. Everybody loves kids who achieve. This is great for the city of Chicago.”
All by themselves, the national champs will boost baseball in their corner of the inner-city world. They can’t revive it to mid-20th Century levels all by themselves. Basketball and football have made very firm inroads. While an Aug. 24 watch party at the Kroc-Salvation Army community center on Chicago’s 119th Street nearly packed four gyms’ worth of space via a pair of giant-screen TV’s, pickup basketball games continued as if nothing else was going on in the far end of the gyms that remained partitioned.

TV’s dog-days darlings, “JRW” will have to take on even more coaches with the expected huge bump in new enrollees for the entry-level T-ball program. The count more than doubled going into this year thanks to some success and TV exposure in 2013. Now it will be the shining example for those who have struggled for decades to revive baseball in the inner city.

But there’s a far more important issue at hand than the high level of competitiveness “JRW” will enjoy, a few more college or pro prospects or the TV ratings that have utterly embarrassed the lagging Sox and Cubs video numbers combined. An old precept in Judaism states that save one life, you’ve saved the world. If one child is diverted from gang membership or being in the wrong place at the wrong time due to an errant bullet after he starts playing for “JRW,” then all the practices, fund-raising, strains and stresses are worth it.

Talking about baseball, not tragedies

“It will help keep kids out of trouble and off the streets,” McReynolds said. “Now everyone will be talking about Jackie Robinson (West) now. Usually, before this thing started, you’d wake up on Sunday and Monday to see how many people were shot. That didn’t happen in that two-week span because of those 13 young men.”

McReynolds was just one of several thousand inspired minds at the Kroc center watch party, one of two the city of Chicago provided for “JRW's” new legion of fans. The other blocked off State Street in the block south of Lake Street just inside the Loop, convenient for Red Line subway riders. Interestingly, the latter party took place in the same location as 1960s-vintage Chicago New Year’s Eve celebrations. Joel Daly, who had the longest run of a newsman on a single Chicago station (WLS-TV), was basically introduced to the local audience, after moving from Cleveland, on New Year’s Eve 1967 standing on a rooftop above State and Randolph commenting on the merry-making. Forty-seven years later, celebrants were able to look right into the WLS news studio windows on the west side of State Street.

After "JRW" won the U.S. championship, Gladys Jones decided to show the flag along with her support of the team at the world-title watch party.
Both watch parties might as well have been New Year’s soirees for the collective joy exuded. Credit the city of Chicago for staging the free parties. And especially thank the city for moving the far South Side watch party indoors after prime-time outdoor showings earlier in the Little League World Series. The Aug. 24 event for the world title game took place with tropical humidity and the thermometer nudging 90. But you might have considered a sweater in several corners of the Kroc center with the air conditioning seemingly working at 105 percent efficiency.

Willis Carrier’s life-saver, though, could not cool the passions of “JRW” fans. Beverly Harris arrived nearly 2 ½ hours early before the first pitch to stake out front-row seats in front of the first big screen for herself and neighbor Cheryl Patterson. Harris and Patterson obviously followed Don Zimmer’s admonition that if you’re early, you’re never late. They live 1 ½ blocks from Jackie Robinson Park – “our neighborhood park” – home field of “JRW.”

“The community, everyone is pulling together,” said Harris, a teacher at Carver Academy. “We’ve always been a close-knit community. This is bringing out the family side of us. I’m running into grammar-school classmates, people I haven’t seen for many, many years...I have relatives all over the country texting me and everyone is rallying for the team.

“This is something that can grow for a movement for more students to play baseball, to move off the streets, to give them a sense of community and something to aspire to that’s not negative.”

Said Patterson: “We are just so overwhelmed, just overjoyed. It leaves us speechless. We’ve been in that neighborhood since 1967. Our houses were being built from the ground up. We played in the houses being built. We were a very close village. We were
there when Mr. (Joseph) Haley started the league (in 1971). I was a cheerleader. All the boys in the neighborhood were in the league. To see it come this far is a full circle.”

**Almost-impossible path to Williamsport**

Chicago Little League veterans who never made it to Williamsport back in the day emotionally were lifted into the Pennsylvania hills by JRW, praised for their alert play.

South Sider Nelson Williams recalled playing on a Hyde Park team that fell far short of Williamsport in the 1980s.

“It’s so hard because you have to first win Chicago, then you have to win the state,” Williams said. “You have to be consistent. At that age, it’s hard to be consistent. I know when I played, there were a lot of errors. At any given time, you could win because there were so many errors. So I think Jackie Robinson coaches really teach them (how to handle) ground balls.”

The Sox would not have missed the 119th Street party for anything. Active in promoting inner-city baseball with directives from chairman Jerry Reinsdorf and executive VP Kenny Williams, the team was represented by Christine O’Reilly, senior director of community relations and executive director of White Sox Charities. Assisted by two aides, O’Reilly was busy passing out Sox white pinstriped jerseys.

“Our dealings with them go back to the original Joe Haley,” O’Reilly said. “Six members of the Jackie Robinson West All-Star team also are members of our Amateur City Elite (ACE) urban baseball program. Obviously we’re so proud of the kids in general. We’ll continue to walk with (this program).”
Even though the Cubs had a home game against the Orioles at the same time as the party, you’d figure the North Siders could have sent a junior marketing employee to represent the team. The JRW story was so enormous that anyone involved in baseball in Chicago needed to climb aboard. But there was no evidence of a Cubs presence.

**Emanuel everywhere in crowd**

Meanwhile, Emanuel was seemingly everywhere. Without a bodyguard, the athletic-shoe-clad mayor, wearing a league “W” badge, fanned out in all directions to greet members of the crowd, staying the entire six innings. When he wasn’t moving through the gym, Emanuel took up a standing-room position at the back of the first section of seats to watch the game, eating popcorn at one point. Gov. Pat Quinn, a diehard Sox fan compared to Emanuel’s Cubs leanings, sat nearby in bleachers wearing a yellow JRW shirt.

To be sure, Emanuel collected political benefits with his re-election coming up in 2015. But party attendees by the hundreds eagerly sought him out for a kind word, a photo or a high-five. The JRW fans seemed genuinely thrilled, politics aside, that he joined them to root on Chicago’s own.

Emanuel’s office, of course, announced a celebratory parade for Aug. 27 that will wind its way from the South Side to Millennium Park. An even greater, logical honor should be a White House visit. Emanuel should know, being Barack Obama’s former presidential chief of staff. He confirmed Obama – who attended league events in his senatorial

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Christine O'Reilly (left), the Sox's senior director of community relations, was busy handing out team jerseys to watch-party attendees. Noted Sox fan Gov. Pat Quinn (right) put aside his MLB loyalties to go “all-in” for "JRW".
past -- was watching the championship game, but to talk about a “JRW” trip to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. was getting ahead of himself, he added. Obama indeed watched the kids and called post-game to offer congratulations.

We can say for certainly the Pitch and Hit Club of Chicago will invite the baker’s dozen of players, along with their coaches, to the annual dinner in Tinley Park in late January. Club president Pete Caliendo also plans to invite Sharon Robinson, daughter of Jackie Robinson, to the event to bask in the additional glory “JRW” has brought to the family name.

The team’s coaches and parents are going to need to ration the kids’ time. They’ll need enough time for school and moving up to the next baseball level when winter begins to recede in 2015. No matter where they go, they’ll always have their 2014 U.S. championship season and well-earned status as one of Chicago’s most beloved teams ever. In this case, youth was served.