

Pitch & Hit Club head Pete Caliendo touches base with the Museum



You have coached, scouted and spoken publicly around the world in your career. You're also a member of the International Baseball Federation steering committee. What's the state of global baseball at present?

Awesome. Major League Baseball and the International Baseball Federation have done great jobs to promote the game world-wide. Obviously, there are always more goals and dreams. Right now, one of the major ones is to get baseball and softball in the Olympics again, which would help fund the national federations that participate in the sport around the world.

In October, the IBAF will bid to have baseball and softball re-instated in the 2016 Summer Games. Are you encouraged about its chances?

It's hard to tell the percentage, but there's a pretty good chance that it will happen. We've worked extremely hard to convince the International Olympic Committee that baseball and softball belong in the Olympics. From what I understand, the main issues are how to get the best players involved, implement the stricter IOC drug policy and decide tie games.

Because of television and sponsors, the IOC is concerned about the length of the games. The International Baseball Federation instituted a rule in which teams start the 11th inning at any point in their lineups with the previous two hitters on base. The IBAF received some criticism for it, but of the five games that went into the 11th inning in the Olympics last summer, all of them finished there.

Nearly 30 percent of all major leaguers were born in foreign countries. Should the United States take that as a threat or a compliment?

That should be an eye-opener from the standpoint that we've got some pretty good players, but they're not savvy enough or trained well enough. You know what? Sometimes they're not hungry enough, either. You know how it nowadays -- they want everything now, and they have a lot of alternatives if they don't get it. In Asia, they're a lot more disciplined than our athletes. In Latin American, they outwork everybody. That's a huge advantage, because they constantly try to get better.

How is baseball better now than when you were a kid?

Wow, that's a tough question. That's a good question. At the college and professional levels, the players are stronger and faster because they have better strength and conditioning programs. There's definitely a difference there. But in the U.S., personally, I haven't seen a whole lot of progress in terms of development at the lower levels.

You're the United States baseball commissioner for one day. What would be your first move?

The No. 1 thing that I would change is the way we develop our athletes 14 years of age and younger. Our volunteer coaches lack the education to teach the correct fundamentals and make the game fun at the same time. As well-intended as volunteers are, it doesn't mean they're educated to do it right. We need a stronger, standardized development program for them. To me, that's a great concern in the U.S. when it comes to our sport. Otherwise, the rest of the world will pass us. It may not come in our lifetime, but sooner or later, it will happen, especially with soccer being the fastest-growing sport in America right now.

How is it done in other countries?

The best situation is have educators teach the youngsters like Taiwan does at all levels of baseball in its school system. In Australia and Canada, it's mandatory for coaches to be certified at all levels. I've been asked this question at conventions, and my answer is, we send our sons and daughters to be taught by educated people in grammar school, but we send them to baseball practices and games with people who aren't educators. Professional coaches go out of their way to become better because it's their profession and they get paid for it.

What is the most common mistake made by amateur coaches here?

It's how they conduct a practice, no doubt about it. A lot of practices are no fun. They're boring, the same old thing. You have to keep the kids interested. Nobody can stand still -- somebody has to do something all the time. And each drill has to develop particular skills. It also has to be a bit competitive, because kids like to be rewarded for their efforts. Once again, it comes down to education.

So you remember the times when your coach pitched batting practice while the rest of the team stood around with their hands in their pockets in 40-degree weather?

Absolutely. Coaches have done that for a hundred years. Put yourself in the kids' shoes. How much fun is that? There are a lot of kids who leave the sport because they're not successful or don't have fun while they play it.

You played ball at the University of Illinois-Chicago. How does college baseball in the Chicago area stack up versus the rest of the country?

Local college baseball has become very good, but it's not easy to keep the local kids here. They dream of going south, because there's a correlation between immediate success and the number of games played. We have great athletes in Chicago -- it's always in the top five in draft picks in the country. It's just that they don't gain as much experience in the cold weather, so they have to catch up later. But we certainly have enough talent here.

(Editor's note: Caliendo consults for The Northwest Sports Academy in Buffalo Grove, where he resides with his wife and daughter.)