



## Sandlot Sluggers

Neighborhood baseball lives!

**A**s a kid growing up in Brooklyn, I watched more baseball than any human being alive. These were the days before cable TV and ESPN, but in New York every Yankee game and every Mets game was on TV, so I tended to see a game or two every day. And being the astute little baseball neophyte, I learned a great deal about the nuances of the game. Of course I played high school baseball and then had three sons, whose teams each needed coaches. I often coached two teams at a time — talk about a glutton for baseball.

So now it's no wonder I have this baseball camp in Eugene, where I assemble young baseball players to the loveliest of baseball diamonds, for a full morning of skills and drills and thrills. Did I mention that I get to pitch? Yeah, and I get to tell everybody what to do.

A few years ago, after five years of operating the baseball camp, I got another baseball bee in my bonnet. I was hearing about all these kids staying home all day playing computer games, surfing the Internet, and watching television. Having always heard from parents that "kids never play baseball in the neighborhoods anymore," I set out to change that. I put out the word that games will be played at Washington Park. Sandlot Baseball Camp was born.

My dream was to bring back neighborhood baseball, where kids rode their bikes to the park and somehow managed to put a baseball game together. I must admit that I wasn't sure how well today's kids would be able to play "unstructured" baseball. I wasn't sure that kids would respond to the quiet park, the low-tech umpire, the unglamorous attire of no uniforms. Parents weren't sure their kids would appreciate the opportunity to run their own game.

We adults fondly remember those neighborhood games where we all got along, we figured out all the problems that came up, and we all had fun. Never mind that much of that is pure fantasy.

Those games were less than stellar sporting

events and often social disasters. I distinctly recall being bullied by the bigger kids, having to acquiesce to the demands of bigger kids or risk a punch in the nose, with many a kid crying all the way home after a less-than-inspiring ball game. Maybe, I thought to myself, with my background and an active imagination, I could make it better than it was. Maybe I could iron out the wrinkles and provide a great "sandlot" baseball experience.

So these days I gather 40 kids, make four fair teams, prepare the fields, provide some equipment, an umpire, and let the players figure out the rest. The result is neighborhood baseball at its ideological best: multi-age (10-14 years), multi-gender, and multi-ability (the better players often mentor the less experienced players). Bullies are not allowed and arguments die as quickly as they begin. Innings follow innings and the great game gets put into the photo-albums-of-the-mind, which is exactly where dreamy 12-year-old ballplayers like it.

Baseball is a simple game; you're safe or you're out. It's a difficult game, a game of failure; players make outs and errors. Kids who play baseball mature more quickly because of having to accept failure. It's an important game for kids to experience.

The verdict? Kids today are really good young people with perhaps even greater abilities toward community harmony than their revisionist parents ever had. Regardless of the many structured activities these kids have enjoyed that the older generations have not, or more likely because of so many social experiences, kids today have an intelligence and sensitivity to issues that we rarely saw in previous generations. Sandlot baseball works because kids still know how to play among themselves. They just need the chance. **EW**

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