

Everybody Plays in This Little League

By **DON JAMES**

Manager, Kankakee, Ill., Little League



Kankakee team won second-place laurels last year. Don James is at right.

Here's how
Kankakee, Ill.,
has confounded
the critics of
organized
baseball for
youngsters

KANKAKEE ORGANIZED its Little League in 1950—and went to the World Series that first season.

We've been there twice since, finishing second last year. What's more, we've never been eliminated in any of the early rounds, even in Illinois state competition.

I understand this is one of the best records in Little League history, and we're especially proud of it because all these teams have come from just one section of Kankakee that has a population of less than 14,000.

But because of our success, we're probably a prime target for some of the criticism that has been leveled at the Little League program. That's why I'm writing this article; it's about time we cleared up a few misconceptions.

Most of the criticism centers on two issues: (1) that only good players get to play and (2) that there's too much emphasis on winning. The fact is these overpublicized conditions are not common. They certainly don't apply to Kankakee or any other well-run Little League.

In Kankakee, any boy who wants to play gets to play. We simply form more teams and more leagues until every boy has a spot. We recruit every eligible boy in our section of town, and we go out of our way to do it.

Each spring, *The Kankakee Journal* and the local radio stations publicize preseason tryouts. We also make speeches at schools, encouraging the boys to show up. Even then some are too shy or, worse, too poor to attempt it. When we hear of such cases, we visit the families and try to relieve their fears.

Two of our best players were in such circumstances. One came to tryouts, created a sensation, then disappeared. We found out that he got

scared when he heard he'd need a glove and baseball shoes—the only equipment the boys are required to furnish. Another boy played half the season before we learned he was using a borrowed glove. Well, we saw that both got equipment of their own.

After recruiting as many boys as we can, the next step is leveling out the talent. This is important because it destroys a boy's confidence to be in a league where the level of talent is much greater—or much less—than his own.

Little League rules limit the number of teams in an official league, and the best players compete in this league. But we form unofficial "minor leagues" until each boy is placed.

The Junior Chamber of Commerce operates our league; local business and industrial firms sponsor individual teams; and our park district donates the playing fields. But three more areas need strict attention to create ideal playing conditions—parents, umpires, and managers.

THE PARENTS are probably most controversial. We've had a winning tradition in our league, so it's no real problem. But I know of one case where a father of a player socked a manager, and sometimes mothers can be even worse. One starts razzing a boy because he drops a throw from her Johnny, and the other mother has to defend her son. Soon everybody is taking sides, and you've opened a real can of worms.

In our league, the veteran spectators usually stop that nonsense at the start. But if they don't, we halt the game and explain as nicely as we can that we won't tolerate it. If the boys can behave themselves, so can the parents.

Umpires are an underrated element. We hire umpires from the state high-school association for all "major-league" games, and we give them

complete charge. But since we operate so many leagues, we have to use other people in our "minor leagues." By far the best qualified are high-school baseball players. They know the game thoroughly, and the Little Leaguers respect them because they're local heroes. Also, the high-school boys are so enthusiastic about the game that they often stop to explain to a youngster why they made a call against him.

MANAGERS like myself like to work with boys. But this is incidental; the important thing is the attitude we bring to the work. Do we, as our critics claim, put too much emphasis on winning, or do we try to encourage the boys to enjoy baseball and let their talent do the rest?

In Kankakee, I know the latter is the case. Certainly we're not opposed to winning—our record proves that. But primarily we teach a boy not how to win but how to play. As his confidence grows, his talent develops. And the most talented of all ultimately rise to the top. It's boys like these that we've sent to three World Series.

I wish our critics could have stood alongside me last year during the final World Series game at Williamsport, Pa., and watched those cocky little kids of ours peppering the ball around the infield and shouting encouragement to one another. If the critics had been there, they would have thought as I did. Only a year or so before, some of those youngsters had been scared little boys who weren't even sure they could make their neighborhood team—and here they were playing for a world championship!

Well, we lost that game, but we'll be back. And some year we'll win it all. If we do, it won't be because we taught our boys fear but because we gave them confidence. I wish every American boy could be taught that before he's 12.

COVER:

If grit and determination could make home runs, this youngster, photographed by Glen Fishback, would knock the ball out of the park every time. For a new look at Little League baseball, read the feature above.

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