

THE GEORGETOWN CURRENT

ATHLETICS IN NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

JULY 9, 2008 ■ PAGE 11

Fifth of July event aims at providing spark to D.C. youth baseball

By DAVID ISCOE
Current Correspondent

The day after the Fourth of July, there was another all-day celebration for many young baseball, softball and tee-ball players in D.C. From 9 a.m. to 9:30 at night, young athletes played in the inaugural Stars and Strikes baseball showcase at Fort Lincoln Recreation Center in Northeast, which included entertainment and support provided by the city and several baseball leagues and businesses.

Teams came from all over D.C. and beyond to play 11 games on Fort Lincoln's two fields, in an event designed to raise interest in baseball throughout the District. While the young ball players competed or enjoyed the free food, coaches and league representatives talked to parents in a recruitment drive. Coaches from three summer programs — DC Dynasty, Home Run Baseball Camp and Headfirst Baseball — put on free skills clinics for the young players.

Ward 5 Council member Harry Thomas Jr. served as the master of ceremonies and worked the crowd during the event.

D.C. has a lot of potential to be a better baseball city, Thomas said. "We have some great facilities." He pointed to the well-groomed Fort Lincoln field, complete with



Courtesy of the Office of Ward 5 Council member Harry Thomas
Council members Harry Thomas and Carol Schwartz award medals to participants at Saturday's Stars and Strikes event at Fort Lincoln Recreation Center.

flood lights for night games, as an example. Thomas said the city government "understands how important baseball is for our young people" and that the event can raise awareness for a sport that sometimes lacks sufficient interest from residents.

"Kids tend to get away from this," he said. Thomas played baseball at Wilson High but took a scholarship for football, which he said was "not my best sport." He said that getting kids to play fall baseball, recruiting more inner-city participants and enhancing softball

and girls baseball programs are important goals.

Girls at the July 5 event got inspiration from professional figures. On hand were the Washington Glory, D.C.'s representatives in the new National Pro Fastpitch League and last year's league champions. Shortstop Amber Jackson and center fielder LaDonia Hughes showed up to meet the young girls and signed boxes of Hot Tamales candy distributed by the WPGC radio station.

At-large D.C. Council member Carol Schwartz and D.C. Council Chairman Vincent Gray were also special guests. Gray, a former Dunbar High School ball player, tossed out the first pitch for one of the afternoon's 12-and-under games.

Behind the scenes, Paris Inman and London Hitchman took care of much of the event's organizing. Inman is the district manager for all of D.C.'s Little Leagues, and Hitchman is involved with the fledgling Foggy Bottom Youth Baseball Foundation and also manages the D.C. Gnats, an independent travel team.

Inman said that travel baseball, a version of the game where youth play using major league base-running rules — including leading and stealing — might help attract better athletes. "Some of the more athletic kids who

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D.C. softball team bound for championship tourney

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When Stan Kolbe started the Washington Senators girls softball team in 1998, he said, the Capitol Hill playing field they used was in a bad state. He recalled long grass, broken glass and hours spent cleaning up the fields before the games. Just as bad, there was no infrastructure for softball, and girls skilled at baseball had to relearn parts of the game, particularly pitching.

In the last 10 years, Kolbe said, there has "been an unbelievable transformation." With the help of local businesses and involved parents, the team now travels to fields across the Eastern United States, playing tournaments against top programs and holding their own.

This year, the older Senators team, which plays 18-and-under fastpitch ball, is headed for the 18-and-under PONY Nationals, a tournament in Vienna, Ohio, with more than 100 teams from around the nation and even a few from overseas.

Last year, the team placed 17th in the tournament, despite "terrible injuries" that sidelined three Senators pitchers, Kolbe said. This year, they hope to place in the top

10. He pointed to past successes against high-level opponents, including a 0-0 tie against last year's eventual champion.

The 18-and-under fastpitch softball is a highly competitive form of the game, said Kolbe.

The Senators — a team of players from D.C. high schools such as National Cathedral, Maret, St. John's and Georgetown Visitation, as well as schools in Virginia and Maryland — play exclusively tournament ball, often against competitive teams that include college players who are still 18.

After a year of college training, Kolbe said, "they're so physically fit it's amazing." Still, the Senators manage to succeed. Last year, along with their 17th-place finish at the PONY tournament, they placed second in the USSSA Elite World Series, a smaller softball tournament.

Although Kolbe runs a competitive team and wants to win games, he said that winning isn't everything. "Now I'm more about winning a battle to get these kids where they want to go," Kolbe said. He said that this goal involves getting everyone a fair share of playing time in front of representatives from college programs. "Mainly, our goal is to develop players who,

when they go on to college, if they play softball, will be credible in the eyes of these coaches," he said.

This weekend, Kolbe said he will take the team to a showcase tournament in New York, where they will play in front of coaches from across the country. He hopes a good showing there will help some of his players get into top programs.

"Every girl in our program at the 18-and-under level, who is moving on, has been either recruited or committed," Kolbe said, but some players still have not decided on a program and may end up with additional options.

When this year's high school seniors move on, Kolbe said, it will be the first time in years they will not be playing in a Senators uniform.

When Kolbe started his team, he found girls who were excelling in Little League Baseball. "Vicki Webb was crushing the ball out of



Courtesy of Washington Senators
Softball's Washington Senators are headed to a high-level tournament in Ohio.



the park when she was 7," he said.

Webb, a catcher who is now in her last year with the team, is a senior at National Cathedral School along with Kolbe's daughter Alie. Alie Kolbe, a standout pitcher, was recently named D.C.'s Gatorade Player of the Year for the second year in a row.

Next school year, Webb will play for Trinity College in Connecticut, while Kolbe will play for Brown University. Several other players are also going on to college. Jordan Reid, Bree Hanafin, Meg Krasne, Angelica Appold and Haley Steuckler have already signed up for college ball, with Delaware State University, Baylor University, the University

of Pennsylvania, Wilmington University and the University of Maryland, respectively.

"We won't be seeing them in their Senators uniforms anymore, which is kind of sad, since that's the uniform they played in" since they were young, said Kolbe.

But for now, they still have a lot of work as Senators. Beyond the showcase in New York, they have tournaments in Pennsylvania and Delaware before the championship in Ohio, which will start July 18.

Although Kolbe said winning isn't his ultimate goal, he still wants the team to do as well as it can.

"I feel pretty good about our chances," he said.