

A Sporting Chance

RBI program pitches inner-city teens an opportunity to play baseball

By *CHEREE FRANCO*
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On a breezy spring afternoon, a 61-year-old man sits in the green wooden bleachers of a 77-year-old baseball stadium. He peers out at the trees, houses and hospital ringing the field, swallows a few times, lowers his head and weeps.

The man is Wayne Gray, a microbiologist at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. The field is Lamar Porter, where a gangly Brooks Robinson once played for an American Legion team called the Little Rock Doughboys and where, more recently, the Benton-born Philadelphia Phillies pitcher Cliff Lee spearheaded an ongoing restoration effort. The query that's unsettled Gray is this: Why is baseball so special?

"Well, I don't know," he begins in a tight voice. "It's a good way for dads and boys" - a thought he doesn't trust himself to complete. He gathers himself. "Like most coaches, I got my start coaching my kids."

Gray's sons are 21 and 24 and haven't frequented baseball fields in several years. Now he coaches neighborhood children, many of whom live with single mothers and can't afford leagues such as Junior Deputy or United States Specialty Sports Association. In 2003, he started a Little Rock chapter of RBI, a recreational baseball program run through Major League Baseball and various Boys & Girls Clubs. RBI stands for Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities.

The first RBI league was founded in 1989 by John Young, a former Detroit Tigers player who, in the late '70s, did a three-year stint with the Arkansas Travelers. "The mission of the league, of RBI here and nationally, is to provide an opportunity for kids to play

baseball," Gray says. "We have some kids who are really, really good, and we have some kids who come out here and they don't know which end of the bat to hold. And we love those kids."

In RBI, everybody bats, runs and throws. There are no bench warmers. When Gray founded the program at Lamar Porter, his sons and their teammates had aged out of the Boys & Girls Clubs' 12-and-under league. RBI is a teen league, serving ages 13 through 18. Playing in a competitive league could cost hundreds or thousands of dollars a season. RBI costs \$60 (\$30 for members of the Boys & Girls Club). About half are on scholarships provided by the Jim Elder Good Sport Fund. Some players come with their parents. Others walk or bike to practice, occasionally snagging rides with a coach.

Gray and the other RBI coaches have a lot of stories; some could make anyone weep.

REVIVING BASEBALL

Young, 65, grew up in Los Angeles when his South Central neighborhood was a baseball mecca. He was one of at least eight kids on his Little League team to make it to the majors. In 1978 when his decade-long career as a pro ended, he began a new career as a scout. That's when he realized that "baseball had become an elitist sport, with the cost of aluminum bats, balls, equipment" and that many inner-city children couldn't afford to play.

This realization haunted him for a decade. In 1989, he was living in Los Angeles again and contacted Major League Baseball Commissioner Peter Ueberroth about founding an inner-city baseball program. MLB offered startup funds. Only 11 kids came to the first practice. "I was really disgruntled. It was a lot of work getting it there, a lot of meetings and following through. I was working full time as a scout. I wasn't trying to run a youth baseball program. I was trying to become a general manager of a Major League Baseball team," Young says.

Young had been away from South Central and didn't realize that neighborhood parks belonged to gangs. Kids were too frightened to come for baseball. A park director, Andy Williams, decided the program was too important to fail. So while Young met with gang leaders to broker truces for RBI, Williams called a dozen other park directors and asked them to contact kids who had aged out of the 12-and-under city league. "Once kids thought it was safe, it blew up," Young says.

RBI fielded 12 teams that year. In 1990, on a scouting trip to St. Louis, Young met Martin Matthews, who founded the Matthews-Dickey Boys & Girls Club. Matthews decided to initiate the program in St. Louis and spread it to Boys & Girls Clubs in other cities.

RBI IN STIFFT STATION

Harold Joyner, owner of Fence World, has coached Little Rock RBI's 16-to-18 division since 2004. Every time he considers quitting, he thinks about how much these teens need him. "A lot of these kids don't have the relationship with their dad that my sons have with me," he says. "They really need some mentoring, and they really need a pat on the back more than anything." Coaches include teachers, lawyers and the head of the Billy Mitchell Boys & Girls Club, among others.

Young has returned to Little Rock several times and helped secure a Major League Baseball grant to repurpose Lamar Porter Field. "I know the percentage of kids who are going to make it to the big leagues and it's not good," he says. "So my thing was, I wanted to use the passion that kids have for athletics ... to expose them to life skills. My goal was to build big league people."

BIG LEAGUE PEOPLE

Judy Cooper says her sons, George and Leonard Cooper, wouldn't have played baseball if it weren't for RBI. "There were some times when I was not working and I was going through some hardships and they really were like, 'Don't worry about it, just bring them to practice,' and I did," she says.

George, 21, began playing baseball at the Boys & Girls Club as a first-grader. Gray was his coach, and George followed him to RBI. George says RBI taught him "always to try to enjoy what you're doing, even if you're losing." But the game that stands out in his memory is one his team won. "It was my first time hitting a home run ... I got to pitch for the first time that game. We didn't have a lot of our players there, and we were trying out everything," he says.

When he was 15, George caught a life-threatening staph infection. He lost 35 pounds, was hospitalized for 30 days and took antibiotics for seven months. Dr. Gray was there. He sat at the hospital with George day after day. Parents, coaches and other players also stopped by. The first few weeks after the hospital, someone from George's baseball network dropped off a meal for the family every day.

George Cooper missed a season, but he returned to RBI and spruced up Lamar Porter Field for his Eagle Scout project. "That was something I really did want to do, help Dr. Gray out and give back to him," he says.

George earned a \$20,000 national RBI scholarship, one of 10 in the program's history. It helped fund his nearly completed physics degree at Morehouse College in Atlanta. "RBI kept me in shape, kept me critically thinking, being observant. It was a good thing all around," he says.

PLAY BALL

It's the first Sunday in May and the first RBI practice of the season. Tony Dunnick, 56, an RBI umpire and full-time volunteer with the Boys & Girls Club, rustles around an equipment closet, searching for cleats for a boy he has just talked into signing up. The boy doesn't want to wear his new Nike Jordans on the dusty field. About three dozen 13- to 15-year-olds line up on the field, trying out the catcher's stance. No one has uniforms yet; they're in athletic shorts, T-shirts and, for some returning players, baseball pants.

There's even a girl out there. Nadir Abdullah, 15, has played softball for five years. She wants to try something different. Daphne Burkins is among the half-dozen parents in the stands. Her son Tyler Pippins, 15, has been with RBI for two years. He used to play at Junior Deputy, but Burkins says this league is less expensive, and Tyler felt more comfortable with the intimate coaching style.

In the outfield, two boys in the 16-to-18 division toss a ball back and forth, waiting for their practice to start. One of them, Darron Wilkes, is about to age out of RBI. He says the biggest thing he has learned is "respect for everybody ... me, my coaches, everybody else out here ... even if they can't play ball, I still got respect."

From the stands, Joyner also waits for the next practice. His favorite RBI moment? "We had one kid who would strike out every time ... I just kept working with him and saying, 'As big as you are, as strong as you are, all you have to do is hit the ball.' His last game, his last time at bat, everybody kind of chuckled as he got up ... and he hit it over the centerfield fence. He's about 6 foot 7 and weighs about 300 pounds." Joyner raises his hand chest level — "He jumped that high off the ground."

Joyner doesn't weep, but his eyes glisten damply. Like Gray, he glances toward the trees and blinks extra hard. "It was a big day for him."