

LITTLE LEAGUE'S REBIRTH IN DETROIT



Photos by Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News

Lucas Craft, 10 of Eastpointe, left, is congratulated by teammate Abdul Ware, 10, of Detroit after hitting a home run.

Diamond *in the rough*

BY GREGG KRUPA
The Detroit News

Detroit — Amid the vast, neatly mowed lawn of Balduck Park on the east side, six baseball diamonds are filled with boys and girls wearing bright, impeccably laundered uniforms. As they play six games simultaneously, dozens of parents lounge on lawn chairs.

On weekends, especially, grills crackle with flames and sizzle under cooking hamburgers, hot dogs and ribs.

“C’mon, T.J.!” one mother, Kathy Dixon, shouts to a batter. “That’s way over your head! Wait till he brings it down! Don’t swing at it, up there!”

Norman Rockwell could have painted a similar scene. But it is unusual in Detroit and across America for city kids, and mostly African-Americans, to play baseball — let alone on fields and with equipment that approximate little leagues in suburbia.

Eagle Sports Club fields the second-largest little league in America’s poorest city, with 675 boys and girls playing baseball. Supported now by local businesses and institutions, it was initially financed and nurtured by Doug Kempton. His experience running a chain of Kinko’s shops in the city persuaded Kempton that if city kids had the same op-

Doug Kempton, founder of the Eagle Sports Club, prays with Katherine Dixon of Detroit.



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portunity he enjoyed growing up, their lives would be different. Eagle Sports Club also gives the children help with reading and schoolwork, and instills life skills and Christianity.

With some support from Major League Baseball, the players union and the Detroit Tigers, Eagle Sports Club could contribute to a rebirth of baseball in the city as baseball seeks to address the issue of plummeting participation by African-Americans in the Major Leagues.

"While I was doing the Kinko's thing, I had great young people working for me," Kempton said. "But some of them could not get it done because they had not been given the same skills, and it really touched my heart.

"Through just prayer and asking God, 'What is it you want me to do about what I am seeing here?' it started with the idea of spending some time with these kids and building into them," he said.

A decade later, the kids say they feel the love, and love the game.

"Well, I just like the sport," said Brian Lucas, 10, of the Sea Dogs team. "I like hitting the ball. I like fielding. When I hit a fly ball and it goes past the outfielders, I feel good about myself because I



Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News

Jared Ingram, 11, of the Sea Dogs leads both teams in a prayer before their game. The faith-based league was started by Doug Kempton.

To learn more ...

■ About Eagle Sports Club, to contact its officials, or to make arrangements to volunteer, to sponsor a team or contribute, go to www.eaglesport-sclub.com, or call (313) 402-4575.

know I tried my best. Even when I strike out, I know I tried my hardest."

A parent, Carlos Lyon Sr., says the difference Eagle Sports Club makes is in developing young people.

"They do a lot to prepare kids for life," Lyon said. "How to act. How to behave. My son, Carlos Jr., likes the emphasis on discipline and life skills."

When it came time to name the nonprofit entity that came

from Kempton's inspiration, he said that someone suggested something from the Bible — Isaiah, specifically: "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

Eagle Sports Club began with about 60 kids playing soccer. Kempton and volunteers, including parents, mowed the lawn at Balduck Park. They prayed with the kids before each game and helped the youngsters read.

Then came flag football; then baseball.

Meanwhile, Balduck Park looked forlorn, like many of the municipal fields around the city, with grass growing thick over the

dirt infields.

"A lot of the baseball diamonds had trees on them that were about 5 or 6 inches around, so they probably had not been played on in 10 or 15 years," Kempton said.

As he ran out of what he could afford to spend from his savings, fundraising began, Kempton said. Grace Community Church, where he became a pastor, St. John's Hospital, Great Lakes Woodworking and Majestic Capital contributed. Then, the Community Foundation of Southeastern Michigan provided money for the tutoring.

Major League Baseball and the MLB Players Association, through their Baseball Tomorrow Fund, and the Detroit Tigers Foundation, which is part of Iltich Charities, chipped in.

"Baseball is a game that teaches a lot of things about teamwork, integrity, courage, and that's something that Eagle Sports does for our community by educating kids and showing them something outside of the traditional game of basketball," said Sam Abrams of the Tigers.

Major League Baseball keeps an eye on the progress.

"I was just there two months ago, and the fields are all finished," said Cathy Bradley, executive director of the Baseball Tomorrow Fund. "The money we provide is generally for organizations to increase the number of kids they serve."

Facilitated by about 350 volunteers, some 2,000 kids now participate in the sport and education programs, amid lots of attention to their souls, provided by the Eagle Sports Club. The annual budget is \$300,000, a sum that Kempton and Terry Brennan, the director of development, consider comparatively modest.

Kempton and Brennan want to replicate the Eagle Sports Club program at Chandler Park, 2 miles west of Balduck, where baseball diamonds were long ago abandoned.

It would be another giant stride toward a renaissance of youth baseball in the city.

The availability does not match the demand, contrary to some skeptics who assert that kids these days dislike the sport.

"You don't have the opportunities to play baseball like we had when we were coming up," said Nate Ford, who coaches a team for Think Detroit PAL. "And, believe me, once they start playing, the young guys like the game. They really do."

Another coach in the PAL, Guadalupe "Lopi" Salazar, says he must search for a suitable practice field.

"We're trying to make sure the kids, along with learning discipline and the mechanics of the game, develop a love of baseball," said Salazar, whose team is from southwest Detroit. "The problem is that, with our location in the city, there are not a lot of places to

practice."

Kempton says that if he, his tiny staff, hundreds of volunteers and the benefactors can maintain their momentum, and if they are joined by others, the chance for kids to play baseball in Detroit will expand.

"The kids still want to play," Kempton said. "The missing piece is the economic piece. What fills the suburban leagues is that the cost is passed on to the kids, and there is a municipality that can keep those fields up."

Kempton and Brennan say it costs Eagle Sports Club about \$160 per player to field the leagues. The kids are charged \$40, and they make the rest up through contributions, grants and sponsorship.

On a recent weekday evening, Kempton gathers with the Jaxx and Sea Dogs at the center of one of the six diamonds at Balduck Park.

"Say it together!" Kempton hollers. And, in unison, players, coaches, Kempton and Brennan shout: "Never argue! Never complain! Never make excuses!"

"And how are you doing this season with never arguing, never complaining and never making excuses?" he bellows.

"Good!" they scream.

"OK, let's pray!"

"Our Father," they begin, led by one of the young players, "who art in heaven. ..."

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