

# America's pastime used to teach kids life lessons

By Parker Philpot  
Sentinel-Voice

It's the season for outdoor sports, lemonade in the park, and taking the family out to the ballgame. In West Las Vegas, the baseball season is getting underway—for the smallest and youngest players, that is.

Thinking back to childhood sandlot games played by boys — and girls, too — right in the neighborhood, Gene Collins wants to “bring back the old baseball feeling,” which is why he and a group of business owners, community leaders and others recently started the Old Fashioned Baseball League for youth.

Collins recalls the days of the Old Negro Baseball Leagues and uses that theme to develop the group, in their team names and in spirit. One

team is named for the Birmingham Black Barons; another is called the Kansas City Monarchs, and they recognize other historic all-Black teams.

In the league's first season, six competing teams played their opening game on Monday at Doolittle Park, and the next one is scheduled for Friday at 6:00 p.m. at the park at “J” and Lake Mead Blvd. Some games will be played at Charles I. West Park on Lake Mead and Tonopah, Collins said.

“We are using baseball to teach a way of life for our kids,” Collins said.

“If we start now we can head off a lot of problems with gang activity...and put something positive in the community.”

The group's focus is to help kids learn to enjoy and

grow through the sport. Collins said that some of these kids “don't have any idea how to play baseball.” He feels it's important that the kids do well in school, too, by requiring them to “maintain a C-average” to be on a team.

He said he can “work with kids that are not so gifted,” to teach them the basics of the game, but he especially wants to give Old Fashioned Baseball little leaguers something fun to do to “make sure they stay out of gangs.”

We are using “motivational tools” to get kids involved in baseball, referring to their planned trip to Magic Mountain and a pro-baseball game later this year. He hopes kids learn to have a “love of the game.” Collins said with humor, “I think all African-American kids



Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

Former Major League baseball player Thomas Ealy, Jr. coaches his son, Thomas Ealy III, on the hand-eye coordination, looking at the ball, as well as proper swing technique.

should play baseball unless they are 6'8, or 7 feet or 9-foot tall...”

The teams are set up by age group — and girls are welcome on the teams — Collins emphasized.

The youngest group is 4-

to 6-years-old, called “T-ball” teams, the game played by hitting a ball from a standing tall tee, not using a pitcher. The next group, “rookies,” are 7- to 8-year-olds. The “minors” are 9- to 10-years-old, and, for this

year, the oldest are “majors” age 11 to 12. Future plans will include youths through age 18.

For more information contact Collins at 810-6342.

Tasha Pope contributed to this article.

## Baseball

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“We have 16 teams playing this season. We use major league names for our teams. We let the kids choose the names,” Haron continued.

Towers said that the number of teams fluctuates each year, adding, “We are still taking registration, so the number of teams could grow to 22 teams.”

For a \$90 fee, the players receive complete uniforms and insurance in case they are injured while competing. Since this league is chartered, all injuries are covered under the National Little League Association. Children from 5-years-old up to age 15 can participate.

Baseball tends to be overshadowed by football and basketball at times, but Haron is insistent that kids give the sport a chance.

“Kids have a better chance of making it in baseball than any other sport,” Haron continued.

Towers supports that with his belief that “baseball probably offers a better collegiate opportunity and professional opportunity. We have more professionals from Las Vegas in baseball than in other sport.”

Towers explained that there are a lot more African-American children entering baseball.

“Most people don't realize that because it's not as

publicized [as other sports]. There were only [a few] African-American kids in high school baseball before. We now have about 15 African-American kids participating in the local high school market —all from our program —and they are doing very, very well. These kids who started with us as 5-year-olds are now 12-years-old and 14-years-old...”

The organizers are in the process of developing a fall league. This will allow interested players to enjoy baseball year-round.

“A lot of our kids don't play baseball all [the time]. They play basketball and football. They only play baseball for one season,” Haron said.

With this new league, players would have the opportunity to develop their skills and have a better shot at winning in the post season.

At the end of each season, all teams in the organization compete for a chance to go to the Little League World Series. First, all the district teams compete for their area titles.

“Our league is in District 4. There are two districts in Las Vegas...about 24 leagues combined. There are two districts in [Northern Nevada], a combination of 4 districts in the state,” Towers explained.

The district winners then go on to compete in the state

tournament.

Then, the state champions are qualified for the regional tournament in San Bernardino, Calif., according to the organizers.

“The World Series has been held [in the fall of each year] in Williamsport, Pa., since it started 75 years ago,” Towers said.

Towers said the “ultimate goal” for the players is the fall championship. He ex-

pressed his gratitude that the whole volunteer team of staff and managers work together for the most important goals —to encourage and support the kids, to keep the sport strong, to gain new volunteers and to get community participation for their fundraising events.

“We are a sanctioned 501c3 (non-profit) organization,” Towers added.

The future seems bright

for the youngsters on the little league teams. They were granted permission this season to have a concession stand during games at Doolittle Park, their home field. This will allow them to raise extra money throughout the season.

Opening day is Saturday, May 7, on the Doolittle field located at “J” Street and Lake Mead Blvd. The opening pitch will be thrown at 10

a.m. This is their biggest fundraiser of the year. All the teams will be in their uniforms, but their first official games won't begin until the following week.

The organizers invite the community to support the future of baseball, right here in our own backyard.

For more information, call the league's 24-hour information message line, (702) 390-8867.

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Timothy Williams is a member of the Nevada & Illinois State Bar, practicing primarily in personal injury cases.

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