

## the lessons of *Baseball*



BY JOEL CHINESON

As a partner at the D.C. outpost of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, Charles Cohen puts in the requisite hours in his office and on the road attending to what he describes as his traditional labor practice and to the needs of such clients as Comcast and IBM.

The Satchel Paige Little League is helping to bring baseball back to the inner city



**THE CRAWFORDS:** Front row, from left to right: Kevin Burgess, Sean Mabry, Josh Smith, Derrell Person, Rafael Ynfante, Kenneth Buckner. Back row: Coach Richard Waldbauer, Coach Dick Lasner, A.J. Matthews, Dazjuhn Barnes, Travis Avery, Terrance Mariner, Sharrod Mariner, and Coach Chuck Cohen. Missing from photo: Lamar Bradley and Rondale Henderson.

In the spring and early summer, the former National Labor Relations Board member spends many of the hours not devoted to lawyering as a teacher, psychologist, counselor, mediator, trainer, groundskeeper, and fund-raiser—which is just another way of saying that he’s the coach of a Little League baseball team.

Cohen is head coach of the Pittsburgh Crawfords, a squad of 11- and 12-year-olds who play in the Satchel Paige Little League, one of the eight leagues in the District of Columbia sanctioned by Little League Baseball Inc. Named for the great Negro League and Hall of Fame pitcher Leroy Robert “Satchel” Paige, the league



was established in 1997 by a group of concerned Ward 4 parents who were dissatisfied with the disorganization of the league in which their children had played the previous season.

“When we formed the Satchel Paige League,” explains Keith Jones, one of the league’s founders and its current president, “we wanted at the very least to provide two things—umpires for all the games and trophies for all the participants.” Another of the league’s goals was to teach not only baseball skills but also “a little history of the Negro Leagues,” says Jones. To this end, all teams in the league are named after former Negro League teams. Joining the Pittsburg Crawfords in the age 12 and under division are the Baltimore Black Sox, the Kansas City Monarchs, the Homestead Grays, and the Philadelphia Stars.

The league has flourished. In its first year, says Jones, the league fielded four baseball teams for 75 kids, age 12 and under. He says the league has grown each year and now has from 275 to 300 players spread among six tee-ball teams, four baseball teams for players age 10 and under, five baseball teams for players age 12 and under, and two divisions of girls softball, for players age 12 and under and ages 16 to 18.

To maintain its autonomy, the league doesn’t accept money from the D.C. government and, thus, must sometimes scramble for funding. Players are asked to pay a yearly fee of \$30, but sometimes they can’t afford to. “We don’t turn any kids away,” says Jones, who in his working hours is a computer technician for *The Washington Post*, “so we do offer hardship awards.” Like many organizations, the league raises money with raffles, bake sales, matching gift contributions, and the like.

This season, the league found an angel of sorts in the Baseball Tomorrow Fund, a joint venture of Major League Baseball and the Major League Baseball Players Association. The fund bestowed a grant of \$16,000 on the Satchel Paige Little League, specifically for the purchase of uniforms, cleats, gloves, and bats. None of the grant money could be used to pay for umpires, though, whose per-game fees usually amount to between \$35 and \$40, but can range as high as \$60 to \$65.

“Money is tight,” says Cohen. “Notwithstanding a good deal of support from families, coaches, and community leaders, we unfortunately find ourselves in a cycle which can make it very



difficult to operate because there is no carry-over of funds from year to year.”

### A PASSION FOR THE GAME

Cohen’s office at Morgan, Lewis could easily be mistaken for an annex of the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. The walls are adorned with autographed bats and baseball photos.

For example, the focal point of one wall is a panoramic view of the now-defunct Forbes Field in Cohen’s hometown of Pittsburgh. The photo was taken during Game 7 of the 1961 World Series, a contest that secured the series for the hometown Pirates when their second baseman, Bill Mazeroski, homered in the last inning to drive a stake into the heart of New York Yankees fans everywhere. The picture means much to Cohen because he was a teen-age vendor in the stands that day.

But elsewhere in Cohen’s office, Baltimore Orioles mementos predominate, including images of Cal Ripken, Camden Yards, and Memorial Stadium. Also on display are photos of the Orioles and their Cuban all-star opponents on a trip the Birds took to Fidel Castro’s island in 1999. Cohen and a fellow Crawfords coach, Richard Lasner, were part

of an American delegation that accompanied the team. Lasner, one-time assistant general counsel for the Government National Mortgage Association (Ginnie Mae) at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, is an accomplished photographer whose baseball photos have appeared in seven books and are part of the Hall of Fame's permanent collection. Most of the photographs on Cohen's wall, in fact, were taken by his friend and fellow coach, whose work is displayed at the Creative Partners Gallery in Bethesda, Md., where he is a member.

Cohen, Lasner, and the Crawfords' third coach, Richard Waldbauer, an anthropologist with the National Park Service, are all members of a Ponce de Leon adult baseball team that plays on Sundays. All three played high school baseball, and Waldbauer played at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a catcher. Cohen spent 12 years, he says, coaching his own son in various Montgomery County leagues, an activity he enjoyed so much and found so satisfying that he wanted to continue. Four seasons ago, a mutual friend put him in touch with Keith Jones, and the three friends' involvement with the Satchel Paige Little League began.

The Pittsburgh Crawfords' home field occupies a corner of the Rudolph Elementary School yard on Third and Ingraham streets in Northwest Washington, three blocks south of Missouri Avenue. Most of the Crawfords attend the school and, thus, it is a convenient place for them to meet and play. For the coaches, this can be a mixed blessing.

On game days, the team attracts a healthy contingent of family and friends to root them on. "Family participation has been great, wonderful," says a grateful Cohen. The downside is that the field is something of a gathering place for the community, and with good weather comes a general hubbub that can prove distracting even to the most focused 11- or 12-year-old boy. Still the coaches press on with their baseball lessons, doing their utmost to ignore the bicyclists that occasionally ride across the outfield and other similar intrusions.

Cohen usually pitches batting practice, and the head coach doesn't baby his hitters. He flings each pitch with considerable heat, and should a batter back away from a delivery that Cohen believes caught part of the plate, he will not hesitate to tell the player that he just bailed out on what would undoubtedly be a called strike.

At first glance, a casual onlooker might even think that Cohen might be riding his charges too hard. But after careful observation, it's apparent that Cohen has developed a good feel for his players and knows how to motivate them.

Take, for example, his handling of a first-year player who was suffering from the cursed batting malady that has plagued Little Leaguers since they first donned uniforms—stepping in the bucket. This right-handed batter, instead of striding toward Cohen with his left foot as he initiated his swing, was stepping down the third-base line. As a result, he managed to put only a few weak ground balls into play—that is, when he didn't swing through Cohen's pitches entirely. With every bad swing his player took, Cohen reminded him with greater emphasis to stride toward the pitcher. Cohen was undeterred even after the batter stepped in the bucket four times in succession.

On the fifth attempt, however, everything clicked. The batter executed a picture-perfect swing and dispatched a screaming line drive into left center field, eliciting shouts of amazement and admiration from his teammates. The smile on the face of the batter, who probably was unaware he was capable of such prowess, generated enough wattage to power the lights at Camden Yards for an extra-inning ballgame. Perhaps only Cohen was not surprised by his player's feat.

"See what you can accomplish when you do things right?" he pointedly told the kid.

When complimented later on his improvement at the plate, the batter said, "Coach says I get better and better every week."

Different situations call for different approaches. Later that day, during the game, one of the Crawfords' batters was called out by the umpire on what can be charitably described as a questionable third strike. The batter, obviously bothered by the injustice of the call against him, made an uncharacteristic error in the field the next inning. Cohen took the boy aside and soothingly counseled him to forget about the strikeout and the error and to get his head back in the game because he was too important to the team. The player redeemed himself later in the game with some heads-up base running.

As the season heads into the final games, the Crawfords are well-positioned to capture the Satchel Paige Little League pennant for their age group and represent the league in the citywide championship. League President Jones thinks Cohen and his coaches deserve much credit for the Crawfords' showing: "Chuck has taken on some challenging kids, and he has them playing good ball. Kudos."

*If you would like to make a donation to the Satchel Paige Little League, send your check to Keith Jones, 411 Decatur St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20011.*