



LITTLE FIELD

• By Matt Simpson

Youth baseball, particularly Little League, is ever-growing in the United States, and Arizona is an epicenter of activity

BIG STAGE



PHOTOGRAPHY: LISA OLSON



Arizona's two dominant teams this decade — Chandler National and Ahwatukee — have combined for four state championships and three trips to Williamsport since 2003.

I

t's abusively hot at Chandler's Snedigar Park on a Friday afternoon in mid-July.

The previous night's monsoon turned two of the complex's four baseball fields into swampy ponds and, as the summer sun beats down on the water, a stifling humidity thickens the air.

The threat of further showers this evening had threatened the semifinal round of the District 13 Little League Majors Division All-Star tournament, but the clouds broke just in time to turn the park into a muggy mess.

Still, the fans come.

Parents, family members and neighbors huddle in clumps of lawn chairs that gather wherever a random tree or a strategically-placed canopy casts a shadow large enough to sit under. Some crowd onto the small bleachers behind home plate, but most line the outfield with their backs to the afternoon sun.

The park is alive with activity.

Two young boys throw handfuls of leaves in the air. A girl on a skateboard has convinced her younger sister to pull her around by her sweatshirt. Other preteen girls gather around picnic tables, more interested in gossiping and texting than the events taking place on the diamond. Three boys spit sunflower seeds at one another.

An impromptu game of Wiffleball has broken out between brothers and cousins of the Little Leaguers who are competing in the tournament's single-elimination final four for the right to represent District 13 at state.

The "Snack Shack" dishes out everything from chips and sodas to pixy sticks and pickles. Everything but peanuts and Cracker Jack that is, but it'll have to do. No one seems to be complaining.

Little League is about bringing communities together, selfless volunteerism in the name of kids and snow cones on warm summer evenings. There are no cuts — every kid who signs up plays — and traveling club teams and college scholarships are still (mostly) far out on the horizon.



Unfortunately, Little League at times is also about pitch counts, overbearing parents and squabbles over inequities (perceived or real) between rival leagues. Stereotypical Little League Dads and age-confused Danny Almontes have all too often encroached on the game's innocence and threatened to destroy one of the few remaining bastions of purity and amateurism in American sports.

On a Friday evening in Chandler, there's no sign of such encroachment. Adults in Ahwatukee's teal and black and in Chandler's maroon and gold cheer on the 11- and 12-year-olds competing to stretch out their springs and extend their childhoods by another game.

"It is kind of that last step before they go on to other things," said Erik Kelly, a Little League dad from Ahwatukee. "Little League is just spring baseball. If you make an all-star team, then you get to play through the summer too. Every game you play is a bonus."

THE SCENE IS repeated throughout the United States on most nights in the summer, with the main difference being the alignment of lawn chairs in or out of the sun depending on the climate.

Little League estimates that on any given evening in the spring

or summer, as many as 10,000 baseball and softball games are being played in its name. In all, 2.64 million boys and girls played baseball or softball within the six age divisions of Little League in 2007. The Major Division, comprised of players between the ages of 11 and 12, is the largest and most well-known.

Little League in Arizona includes 14 districts and over 180 local leagues ranging from Bisbee, Douglas and Sierra Vista in District 8 on the Mexican border to Kingman, Lake Havasu and Laughlin in District 9 straddling both sides of the Colorado River.

The game is not contained by the U.S. border, or even by the Atlantic or Pacific oceans. Little League is also played by army brats on bases in Saudi Arabia and Germany and by the citizens of nations as diverse in culture and politics as Belarus, China, Jordan and Vietnam.

In all, there are about 177,000 teams at all age levels spread across 7,300 local leagues in more than 80 countries around the globe.

And in few places on the globe is the game played as well as it has been over the past few years along the southern edge of Arizona's District 13.

Comprising the communities of Ahwatukee, Chandler, Guadalupe and Tempe, District 13 has been dominated since its inception in 2001 by the all-stars from two leagues — Chandler National and Ahwatukee.

Between 2003 and 2007, the better of Chandler National and Ahwatukee went on to outlast the winners of Arizona's other 13 districts to represent the state at Little League's Western Region tournament in San Bernardino, Calif., four times.

Three times in the last five years Chandler National or Ahwatukee ousted the best teams from Hawaii, Nevada, Utah and northern and southern California to advance to the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pa.

That's no small feat.

"I'm as amazed as anybody else," said Joe Diaz, the district administrator at the head of District 13. "In seven years, we've been to Williamsport three times. There are district administrators who've been doing this for 20 or 25 years and have never followed their team beyond their state tournament. I've been very fortunate."

A bracket attempting to encapsulate Little League's all-star tournament would be a tad messier than your typical single-sheet March Madness pool. The field contains more than 7,000 teams when the tournament commences in July. Roughly 500 teams sur-

vive the district and state levels to advance to regionals or their international equivalent.

Eight domestic teams and eight international teams advance to Williamsport. It takes more than 14,000 games in 40 days to cut the field to the final 16.

The fact that one of the 16 teams has begun its final journey to Williamsport with a short drive up I-10 to Sky Harbor is a mathematical oddity. It's especially strange considering that before Chandler National advanced in 2003 an Arizona team hadn't advanced since Tucson International did in 1986.

"Over two-and-a-half million kids play Little League baseball and only 16 teams get to go to Williamsport," Kelly said. "When you think of the numbers, it's a long shot for anyone to even get there once."

WILLIAMSPORT IS A rural community of around 30,000 residents situated 130 miles northeast of Philadelphia on a key north-south highway connecting Buffalo, N.Y., and Washington, D.C.

In 1939, Williamsport resident Carl Stoltz organized his nephews and their friends into three 15-member teams sponsored by and named for local businesses: Jumbo Pretzel, Lycoming Dairy and Lundy Lumber.

Little League was born.

By 1945 Little League had expanded beyond the state's bor-



Hundreds of thousands of volunteers across the world draw baselines, take care of fields, work at concession stands and coach teams to keep Little Leagues running.

PHOTOGRAPHY: LISA OLSON

ders, and in 1947 Williamsport Maynard defeated Lock Haven, 16-7, in the all-Pennsylvania championship game of the first Little League World Series.

Americans were soon drawn by the purity of a competition between 12-year-olds on summer vacation. In 1953 CBS broadcast the event nationally for the first time, and in 1959 the event moved into Howard J. Lamade Stadium. The stadium accommodates more than 40,000 spectators thanks to high sloping hills beyond the outfield fence.

Total attendance for the 32-game series routinely exceeds 300,000 but not a single ticket is sold. Admission is free.

"It absolutely transforms that town," Kelly said. "Their hotel occupancy averages about 30 percent throughout the year. But during those two weeks, you can't get a room anywhere."

Not that Kelly was surprised by the scale of the event.

Kelly moved from upstate New York to Virginia when he was 10, and the family planned their annual summer trips back home to coincide with the series. From the late 70s to the mid 80s, Kelly attended games every year.

When he became a father, he dreamed of taking his own sons to watch a game, but their school always interfered.

In the spring of 2006, Kelly's own father passed away. While sitting together on a lakeshore in upstate New York following the memorial service, 12-year-old Conor informed his father that if Ahwatukee advanced to the Little League World Series they'd be back in the area for his 40th birthday.

It seemed farfetched at the time, but Ahwatukee defeated Chandler National twice by a combined three runs to win District 13, then survived a pair of one-run games at the Western Region tournament to beat the odds and earn a trip to Williamsport.

Conor, now a freshman at Desert Vista, recalled the moment two years later while watching his younger brother represent Ahwatukee at Snedigar Park in July. Conor was on the bench when a groundout sealed Ahwatukee's 11-4 region championship victory over River Park of Fresno, Calif.

"We were all waiting at the entrance to the dugout dying to get out," he recalled. "When you get to the dog pile, you just jump on and hope you don't end up on bottom."

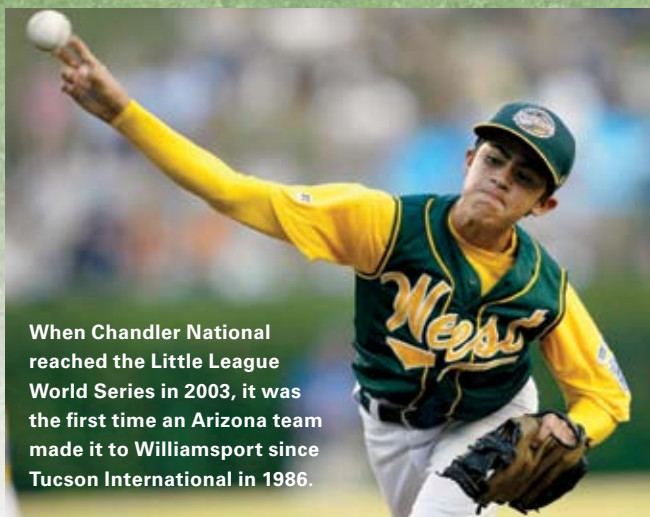
Long before reaching baseball's biggest stage, many future Major Leaguers have dreamed of participating in the dog pile that signifies a trip to Williamsport.

It's estimated that between 60 and 70 percent of all Major Leaguers played Little League, but only 31 Major Leaguers have advanced to the Little League World Series. Ten of them — Jim Barbieri, Derek Bell, Charlie Hayes, Carney Lansford, Jason Marquis, Boog Powell, Jason Varitek, Ed Vosberg and Rick Wise — also played in Major League Baseball's World Series.

The dream of reaching Williamsport was shared by future president George W. Bush, a catcher for Midland Central Little League and the first Little Leaguer to ascend to the country's highest office.

Lucky No. 13

» » By Matt Simpson



When Chandler National reached the Little League World Series in 2003, it was the first time an Arizona team made it to Williamsport since Tucson International in 1986.

In the last quarter century, only four Arizona champions (in bold) have advanced to the Little League World Series. That includes three District 13 teams in the last six years.

- 2008 - Arrowhead (Glendale)
- 2007 - Chandler National – Advanced out of pool play with a 2-1 record but lost 16-6 to eventual champion Warner Robins of Georgia in the quarterfinals.
- 2006 - Ahwatukee American (Phoenix) – Failed to survive pool play despite a 2-1 record due to three-way tie breaking procedure.
- 2005 - Chandler National
- 2004 - Deer Valley (Glendale)
- 2003 - Chandler National – Swept undefeated through pool play but lost 4-1 to eventual runner-up Boynton Beach of Florida in quarterfinals.
- 2002 - Arrowhead (Glendale)
- 2001 - San Xavier
- 2000 - Canyon del Oro (Tucson)
- 1999 - North Scottsdale
- 1998 - McCormick Ranch (Scottsdale)
- 1997 - Tucson American
- 1996 - Santa Rita (Tucson)
- 1995 - Bullhead City
- 1994 - North Scottsdale
- 1993 - Deer Valley (Glendale)
- 1992 - Tucson Western
- 1991 - Sunnyside (Tucson)
- 1990 - Cactus West (Phoenix)
- 1989 - Mesa National
- 1988 - Nogales
- 1987 - Nogales National
- 1986 - Tucson International – Bested all American opponents before falling 12-0 to Tainan Park of Taiwan in the tournament championship.
- 1985 - Nogales
- 1984 - Sunnyside (Tucson)
- 1983 - Tucson American

"Years ago, when I was playing on those dusty Little League fields in West Texas, I never dreamt I'd be President of the United States," the President said while attending the Little League World Series in August 2001. "One of the things I did dream about, though, was making it to Williamsport, Pa., for the Little League World Series."

WILLIAMSPORT WELCOMED AHWATUKEE'S all-stars with open arms in 2006, just as it welcomed Chandler National players in 2003 and 2007 — and just as it has welcomed players from around the country and around the world since 1947.

Prior to Ahwatukee's first game the players chatted it up with ESPN personalities, took their bows in the opening ceremonies and tossed candy to fans from the back of a flatbed truck during a parade attended by more than 10,000 people.

When the team received a shipment of 500 commemorative t-shirts from home one day, locals bought out their inventory within two hours.

The town itself was just as Kelly remembered it from his youth.

"That's kind of part of the appeal, it's sort of stuck in time," he said. "Things get updated obviously, but when you drive down Route 15 and see the Little League headquarters, it looks the same to me as it did 20 years ago."

The Ahwatukee parents were welcomed as warmly as the players — with one exception. Because of the intense popularity of the event, rooms were exceedingly difficult to come by.

The parents ended up renting a house on Crystal Lake, nearly 45 minutes and a bumpy ride down a dirt road away from Williamsport.

Jake Dominy, who coached Ahwatukee's all-stars this summer, didn't have a son in majors in 2006, but he and two of his friends took their sons to Williamsport anyway. The six shared a single hotel room in town and only managed to swing those accommodations because the clerk was from Tucson and had seen Ahwatukee's regional final televised on ESPN.

The experience was well worth the cramped quarters.

"It was like going to the Olympics," Dominy said. "You have teams from all over the country plus teams from Saudi Arabia, Japan, Curacao, everywhere. It's just a great environment."

More than 30,000 baseball fans filed into Williamsport's two stadiums to watch Ahwatukee's three games. And that figure doesn't take into account the thousands of people around the country who watched on ESPN.

Not that the players noticed.

"It was just a normal baseball game. The crowd didn't really affect anyone," Conor's teammate Ryan Modi, now a sophomore at Desert Vista, recalled coolly. "You don't really notice what's going on when you're out there."

Ahwatukee's third and final game of the tournament wasn't just any old baseball game for Conor. As he had months earlier predicted while sitting by a lake in upstate New York, his father was spending his 40th birthday in one of the favorite places of his youth.

Thirteen-thousand people watched as Conor collected his only hit of the tournament in the team's 4-1 victory over Staten Island of New York. After the game, Conor asked his dad to meet him at the compound housing the participants.

When his dad arrived he presented him with the autographed ball.

"That just about did it," Erik recalled while watching his younger son Zach compete for Ahwatukee's 2008 all-stars in July. "Memories don't get much better than that."

Due to innocence, naivety or the simple lack of sentimentality that comes with youth, the joy of such moments seemed lost on Conor two years later, when he said matter-of-factly, "It's pretty cool that all these people come out just to watch 12- and 13-year-olds playing baseball."

THE ROMANTICISM OF 12- and 13-year-olds playing baseball compels many people to do more than simply watch. Every year, 1



Even on a hot, muggy night during monsoon season in Arizona, fans turn out to watch district championships, when each game might be a team's last.



Chandler National reached the United States semifinals in 2007, winning four games in the tournament before losing in the elimination round.

million adults volunteer to support Little League's efforts in a staggering array of capacities.

From league officers, managers and coaches to support staff and field workers, Little League is built upon the backs of adult volunteers. Umpires can receive pay, but the practice is frowned upon. Still, the organization's Umpire Registry includes more than 3,000 names every year.

To recognize the spirit of volunteerism that sustains its existence, the organization has recognized a Little League Volunteer of the Year since 1989. (John Barrow of Holbrook was recognized in 1989.) When a second Little League World Series field was opened in Williamsport in 2001, it was named Volunteer Stadium.

Few do more with less fanfare than district administrators like Joe Diaz.

Diaz first became involved with Little League when his oldest son joined Tempe's league. That son is now 40, but Diaz has kept on volunteering. He recently completed his eighth season as District 13's administrator.

"I don't want to say it's a hobby. It's more like a passion," Diaz said with a laugh.

The regular season is relatively quiet for district administrators, but the postseason is a whole new ballgame.

From the beginning of June until each of District 13's age group champions are eliminated at state or beyond, Diaz estimates he

dedicates between 40 to 60 hours per week to his duties. Tasks run the gamut from coordinating with local league organizers to calculating tiebreakers to serving as the district's point man at actual games.

"In a metro area like ours, you better have your act together because people will eat you alive," said Wayne Lallier, another veteran volunteer whose Little League service has spanned three decades in nearly every role imaginable. "Joe's got his act together. He does a great job. In order for that district to succeed the way it has, Joe has had to play a big part in it."

Many who volunteer begin as Little League parents and then like Diaz stay onboard after their children have outgrown the game. Dominy, who followed Ahwatukee's all-stars to Williamsport in 2006, had not yet been chosen to lead the league's 2008 team when his son broke his leg in early April. But when he was asked to serve as the team's manager, he didn't hesitate to accept.

"I love kids and I love baseball, so I said, 'What the heck,'" Dominy said. "You look around at all the teal shirts and you can see that the community really supports us. You'll see people around the field whose kids haven't played in five years. They'll drive by the field, see us playing and come watch the game. It brings the community together."

From mid-February until his team is eliminated, Dominy figures he commits about 10 hours per week to coaching duties, includ-

ing official games and practices and voluntary hitting and fielding work.

The commitment extends into his personal life.

This spring he convinced employees of his asphalt company to donate their free time to install a warning track at Ahwatukee's field, and when he and his coaches meet socially the team often dominates conversation.

Regardless of the role they fill, most if not all of the adult volunteers who sustain Little League share Diaz's love for the sport's purity.

"Little League is one of the last purely amateur kids sports," Diaz said. "It's not a club team. It's not a travel team. It's not a select team. You don't have mass tryouts and then kids get cut or make the team and don't get to play. Everyone gets a chance to play."

AS CHANDLER NATIONAL marched toward yet another District 13 championship last summer, an adult fan of a rival league paced beyond the outfield fence holding a sign that read, "Break Up Chandler National." He wasn't the only person thinking it — especially when Chandler National won state for a third time and region for a second time in just five years.

The boundaries of Chandler National encompass four high-

growth ZIP codes clustered around the well-paying jobs of the Chandler Airpark. Despite a decade of relentless growth in the area, the four ZIP codes are still home to swaths of undeveloped dirt lots and farmland.

So when Arizona's largest Little League had more than 900 children sign up in 2007 (compared to less than 300 in other District 13 leagues), it was clear the time had indeed come to break up Chandler National.

"They were a numbers juggernaut. It was like a 5A high school playing Wilcox," Dominy said. "They didn't like it. But we felt like, welcome to our own world. It's more competitively balanced."

Lallier, who has seen plenty of breakups during his years as a Little League volunteer, said the process is easier said than done.

"Splitting a league is no fun at all. There's no easy way to do it and there's often a lot of really hard feelings," he said. "You've got a league and its assets — money, equipment, fields. Then you have to split that up evenly somehow. It can get real messy."

Rather than force a true divorce on Chandler National, the league was parsed into two divisions. The divisions are governed by the same board of directors and share both Snedigar Park and the league's traditional maroon-and-gold color scheme.

However, the league is now forced to field two all-star teams.



Howard J. Lamade Stadium in Williamsport, Pa., is the annual home of the Little League World Series, which puts eight U.S. teams and eight international teams in a 16-team bracket tournament.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES

The South all-stars, hailing from Chandler's fastest-growing 85249 ZIP, wear maroon shirts with gold numbers and trim. The North all-stars wear gold shirts with maroon numbers and trim.

(The road to San Bernardino has gone through Chandler National for years, but this was the first summer Ahwatukee had to face maroon and gold in both the semifinals and the finals in order to advance out of the District 13 tournament.)

Despite the fact that no one was forced to surrender the Chandler National identity and that the split created opportunities for 12 more children at each age level to extend their seasons into all-star play, the news wasn't warmly received by all.

"The thing is, if you drive down the road a little bit, it's still Chandler and there's nothing but open land over there," Diaz said as he pointed south to the undeveloped areas that could someday cause another breakup. I know somewhere down the road when the economy picks up, we're going to have a bunch of homes down there. And then what? The split was pretty painful. And a lot of that pain came from the adults. Not so much from the kids."

IT'S THESE SORTS of encroachments by adults that push the dividing line between amateurism and professionalism ever closer to Little League. The purity that drives tens of thousands to watch Little League World Series games — and even more to volunteer — has all too often been challenged in recent years.

There's Almonte, the 5-foot-8 fastballer who led the Bronx to a third-place finish at the 2001 Little League World Series before it was discovered that he was two years too old to play. Don't get Diaz or Lallier started on the paperwork and background checks required of a district administrator at the start of tournament play.

There's the perceived over-exposure of the game provided by ESPN, which televised all 32 games of the 2007 Little League World Series, not to mention each of the eight region championship games.

Of course, the coverage is not all bad. Former Ahwatukee Little Leaguer Modi said he didn't mind because ESPN shipped him and his teammates a set of DVDs commemorating their trip to Williamsport.

And then there's the Little League Dad, the pop culture stereotype of the overbearing father living vicariously through his son and crossing the line between support and abuse of players, manager or umpires.

Sports psychologists have labeled the phenomenon "Little League Parent Syndrome" even though it exists at all levels of youth sports regardless of the type of competition.

"There's always the vocal minority," Dominy said. "I'm sure everybody thinks their kid should be batting third and playing shortstop. I don't know of anyone who can be objective about their own kid."

Arizona has not been immune to the syndrome.

During Ahwatukee's run in 2006, the *East Valley Tribune* reported that a player's mother confronted an opposing manager and accused him of purposely losing a game to prevent Ahwatu-

kee from advancing out of pool play.

To counter such issues, Diaz delivers the same speech to all-star managers and coaches before the start of the District 13 tournament every summer.

"For the first three or four games of the district tournament, everybody is everybody's friend. In the last few games, it's a dog eat dog world because everybody wants to get into the semifinals," Diaz said. "When it gets to that point and the pressure builds up, I ask them to remember that it's a kids' game and we're just here to facilitate the kids having fun. That's been my premise all along. As adults, our role is to make sure the kids have fun."

ON A SATURDAY night at Snedigar Park, it seems Diaz and his peers have succeeded. In the previous evening's district semifinals, Ahwatukee and Chandler National North defeated their opponents to advance to face one another for the district crown and the right to advance to the state tournament.

The Wiffleball game has grown considerably as players vanquished in Friday's games return to the park for less organized entertainment.

Perhaps fortunately, the Little Leaguers can't see their brothers and neighbors so disinterested in their game. The outfield chain link fence, three rows of lawn chairs and a thick line of nervous dads and uncles obscure the view between Little Leaguers and Wiffleballers.

The players on the diamond don't have "big league" down. Some kick the dirt after bad plays. Other put a tad too much oomph into celebrations.

Through 4 ½ innings of a six-inning contest, players in maroon and gold are the only ones celebrating. Attempts to break up Chandler National appear to have been fruitless as the North team powers its way to a 6-0 lead. Ahwatukee starter Garrett Rupp is tagged for five of the runs and is near tears when Dominy removes him from the mound.

But in the bottom of the fifth inning, Ahwatukee answers with six runs — three on a Zach Kelly home run — to knot the score.

After Chandler National fails to score in the top half of the sixth, Rupp makes amends for a tough start by lacing a two-out, bases-loaded single off the right-centerfield fence to break the tie and send Ahwatukee to state.

Rupp can't contain his excitement. He waves his fist as he rounds first and heads toward second before hesitating as he tries to decide if he's obliged by the rules to continue running the bases or if he's free to join the celebratory dog pile near home plate.

Assured by Dominy, he cuts short his trip around the base paths and piles on.

Ahwatukee's Little Leaguers don't yet realize that their season will come to an end in state tournament pool play just two weeks later.

All they know is that springtime has been extended — for at least one more game.