



Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy: Going to Bat for Inner-City Youth



The Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy provides youth in underserved neighborhoods of Southeast Washington, DC, with a safe and supportive environment to learn and play. The Academy is located in an area with some of DC's highest rates of crime, obesity, diabetes, and school dropout. With a state-of-the-art campus that includes training and education facilities, a full kitchen, and three baseball diamonds, the Academy is a place where DC youth can develop relationships and build character both on and off the field.

The Academy was a long time in the making. When Major League Baseball returned to Washington, DC, in 2005, the DC government created a plan to work with the Washington Nationals Major League team to promote baseball among inner-city youth, whose participation in sports had been waning for years. After almost a decade of preparation, the Academy's first participants arrived in 2014. In 2019, 150 Scholar-Athletes in grades 3 to 8 participated in the Academy's holistic enrichment programming year-round, while hundreds more youth play baseball in the local Little League and the Academy-sponsored summer league, YBA PLAY.

Participants have access to an impressive menu of sports and academic programs, including after-school enrichment, tutoring in reading and writing, year-round baseball clinics, summer leagues, travel teams, and a Books and Baseball program for preschool-aged children. Players from the Washington Nationals are known to show up at practices, and Screech, the Nationals' bald eagle mascot, makes the occasional fly-by.



Strategies: Make Sports Accessible for All

By directly addressing barriers to sports participation like cost, equipment, uniforms, and engagement, the Academy provides a home base for youth who otherwise might be left on the bench. The Academy makes it easy for youth to participate by working with more than 30 DC schools and offering all programs free of charge. Comparable programs in DC could cost families up to \$4,000 per year. The Academy completely removes that pay-to-play obstacle.

The Academy also gets creative to keep youth engaged. As Charlie Sperduto, Senior Manager of Baseball and Softball Operations, puts it, "When you finally get kids out on the field to try it, you'd better make it fun." And sometimes, he says, the best way to do that is to change the rules. The Academy blends high-quality instruction with life lessons and positivity to promote a faster pace of play and reward effort. For young players new to the game, the Academy's summer league plays with no outs. Each team starts with five batters, and players can earn more batters for their team by doing something positive, like hustling on or off the field. These modified rules maximize at-bats, get players more active, reward hard work, and make the game more accessible and fun for new players.

Impact: Outstanding Young Athletes

The Academy measures success by tracking participation, improvement in sports skills, and changes in youths' self-reported social-emotional indicators. In 2018, nearly 4,000 youth participated in the Academy's programs, and the evaluation data clearly indicate positive impact on youth development.

For example, more than 90 percent of participants in YBA PLAY, one of the Academy's most popular programs, said that their baseball skills improved, that they learned new things, and that they want to keep practicing and getting better. And all participants indicated a positive sense of self, reporting that they see themselves as "being outstanding" — an Academy core value.

Lesson Learned: Reinvent the Game

By rewriting the rules, meeting youth where they are, and making sports accessible in southeast DC, the Academy offers a unique experience that focuses on process over outcome and hustle over stats. This, Sperduto says, is a win-win. "Helping kids win on the scoreboard of life and making the community better through baseball is pure joy."

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The National Youth Sports Strategy Bright Spots highlight how successful programs are boosting youth sports participation for all. Learn more about the Strategy and how to support youth sports in your community: health.gov/PAGuidelines/Youth-Sports-Strategy

