

Kids of summer

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue



Fans at a Jackie Robinson West watch party in Chicago. Photo by [Will Wilkins](#), used by permission.

The baseball season is winding down, and Chicago's two professional teams will end the season with some of the worst records in Major League Baseball. Yet Chicago still went a little crazy over baseball this summer, because the boys of Jackie Robinson West, a team from the far South Side, won the Little League national championship. This team of 11- and 12-year-old African Americans captivated the city and the nation with their spirit and poise. They were celebrated on the front pages of local newspapers and given a victory parade through the city.

JRW played its championship games against the backdrop of events in Ferguson, Missouri, where an unarmed black teenager was shot six times by a police officer and a tone-deaf and unresponsive police department withheld information and confronted protesters wearing full military battle gear. In the face of that story, there was joy in seeing African-American young men from a disadvantaged neighborhood plagued by violence showing the world their talents.

Behind the success of the JRW team is a significant history. The JRW league was founded in 1971 by the late Joseph Haley, who wanted to bring youth baseball to the South Side. The program grew from one team to a league that now has 38 teams. The goal of JRW all along, said Haley's son, was not to win championships but to impart leadership skills to children through the work of dedicated volunteers and parents.

The number of African Americans participating in Little League has declined by half since the 1980s, and they account for only 8 percent of players. The presence of blacks in Major League Baseball has also dropped sharply. There are several reasons for this. Football and basketball offer college scholarships that are too enticing to pass up, and they offer big paydays for those who make it to the professional level. Furthermore, as Wayne G. McDonnell Jr. writes in *Forbes*, “The costs of playing competitive baseball today at the amateur level are exorbitant due to travel requirements, tournament fees, uniforms, equipment and playing on multiple teams.”

But that isn't the final word. Programs like Jackie Robinson West, the Little League Urban Initiative, Major League Baseball's Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities program, and the Urban Youth Academy have increased African-American participation in baseball. And as JRW showed, when people are given resources and opportunity, great things can happen.

The boys of Jackie Robinson West have reminded us of the hopefulness built into the nature of baseball. They have also shown how hope can be fostered in inner-city neighborhoods. We might best respond to the example of Jackie Robinson West by working to bring caring, energy, and creative new beginnings—and yes, also baseball—to all children.