

PLAY BALL!

A CONVERSATION WITH JIM ASHTON

As the young baseball players lined up with their teams for the parade honoring Opening Day for the Westlake Village baseball season, ten-year-old Ben Ashton hurried through the wet morning grass looking for his new team. His father, Bill Ashton, took his seat in the outfield to watch the parade of young boys and girls, which signaled the return of springtime baseball to the southern California community.

Just before the playing of the national anthem, Brownsville native Kevin Park also found a seat and awaited the appearance of his two boys in the parade of baseball teams. While scanning the crowd for the familiar faces of parents of last year's teammates, Kevin spotted someone bearing a remarkable resemblance to a hometown friend whom he had not seen for thirty years.

"If that is Bill Ashton, what is he doing in Westlake Village for the opening of the baseball season?" Kevin wondered. Westlake Village, a community just south of Thousand Oaks, California, is several thousand miles from the place where Kevin had last seen Bill Ashton – Brownsville, Pennsylvania.

As the parade began, several people greeted Bill using his first name, eliminating any thought that this was a case of mistaken identity. After the baseball parade had marched past the crowd of parents, Kevin walked over to an area where Bill had been rejoined by his son and offered a handshake.

"Bill?" Kevin said.

A surprised Bill Ashton looked up. He studied the face of the man whose hand was outstretched toward him, then smiled broadly in recognition and shook his hand.

The reunited friends sat down and began catching up on the decades that had passed since their own summers of Little League play at Fenwick Park in Brownsville. They discovered that each was working and living near Thousand Oaks, California, where Kevin was an attorney and Bill was a pharmaceutical executive. It was fitting that the two were

reunited at a youth baseball game, because the seed that had spawned their original friendship was the Brownsville Little League.

Kevin told Bill that just a day earlier, he had been practicing baseball with his own sons and offered them advice that had been given to him many years ago by his own Little League manager. The manager of Kevin Park's 1966 Brownsville Little League Optimist team was Bill Ashton's father, Jim Ashton.

That chance West Coast meeting a few years ago between the two Brownsville Little League alumni revived a friendship that continues to this day. When Kevin and Bill began reminiscing that morning at the ball field, Kevin wasted no time in asking about Bill's father, for whom Kevin still has great admiration.

"I was pleased to learn that after all these years, Jim Ashton is alive and well at age ninety," Kevin wrote me recently. "Mr. Ashton coached me in 1965 and 1966, and I am proud to say that we won the league championship under his tutelage in 1966. I do not know how many years he coached in the Brownsville Little League, but I do know he was a guest of honor at the fiftieth anniversary of the league several years ago."

Perhaps some of our readers recognize the name Thousand Oaks. This past August, the Thousand Oaks Little League team participated in the Little League World Series at Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Thousand Oaks won the U. S. championship game, then was defeated in the World Series title game, 5-2, by a veteran team from the Caribbean island of Curacao.

Bill Ashton no longer lives in Thousand Oaks, having been transferred a year or so ago to an eastern office of his pharmaceutical company, Amgen. When the Thousand Oaks team won the U. S. championship game this year and advanced to the Little League world title game, Kevin Park sat down at his computer in Thousand Oaks, California, and emailed Bill Ashton in Philadelphia.

"I emailed him to remind him to watch Thousand Oaks play on television at Williamsport," Kevin informed me. "Bill's return email informed me that he and his father, along with Bill's brother James, who was the Optimist Club bat boy for my 1966 team and is now CEO of a computer company, attended several of the World Series games in Williamsport.

"Mr. Jim Ashton's career as a Little League coach," Kevin wrote to me, "seems to me to be a wonderful human interest story."

It is a tale of a man who has loved baseball and kids for as long as he can remember. Jim Ashton and his wife Betty lived at 316 National Pike East in Brownsville for fifty-two years. About two years ago, they sold their home and moved to the Philadelphia area to be near their two

sons, Bill and Jim.

After exchanging emails with Kevin Park and Bill Ashton, I learned that Jim and his wife Betty would be visiting the Uniontown area in early October to spend some time with relatives. I arranged to talk with Jim while he was in the area, and of course, the topic of our conversation quickly turned to youth baseball.

“You were a manager in the Brownsville Little League for a quarter of a century,” I said to Jim Ashton. “I know you went to the Little League World Series this year. I am wondering how many times you have been to Williamsport to watch the Series?”

“This is the first time I have ever gone to the World Series,” he said, surprising me. “I knew that Bill used to live in Thousand Oaks, California, and when we realized that Thousand Oaks had made it to the World Series, Bill said to me, ‘Dad, would you like to go?’

“I said, ‘I sure would.’

“So Bill called his brother Jim – they live only a couple of miles apart – and Jim said he would like to go too. We all got together and left at seven a.m. We saw the Little League stadium and watched two games in the U. S. bracket of the tournament. Thousand Oaks beat Charlestown, North Carolina, in one of the games. We didn’t see the world championship game against Curacao, because that was not played until the following week.”

The conversation turned to Jim Ashton’s introduction to the game he has grown to love.

“Jim, did you play youth baseball in Brownsville?” I asked.

“I was not born in Brownsville,” he replied. “I was born in 1914 in Filbert, a coal mining town. We didn’t have Little League, but we could play on the nice ball field at Filbert when the coal mine baseball team wasn’t using it. We’d play in the daytime, and we had to be off the field by three o’clock when there was a game, because the players came at about that time.”

“Did you ever play for the Filbert mine team?”

“I started off as the water boy for the mine’s ball team,” Jim chuckled. “Then, when I got a job at the coal mine on my twenty-first birthday, I immediately started playing on the Filbert baseball team. I had worked in the company store before that.”

“This all happened after you graduated from high school?”

“That’s right. I went to school in Filbert, then to Redstone High School. I had six sisters and one brother, and we all graduated from Redstone High School. My wife Betty also went to Redstone for two years, but she graduated from Brownsville.”

He paused. “You know, Filbert had a football team too.”

“Football?” I said. “I knew most patches had their own baseball teams, but I didn’t know they had football teams.”

“Yes, I played football for Filbert and for Smock coal mine. I also played football for Uniontown Keljens.”

“Keljens?”

“It was an independent football team that was named after the two owners or managers, whose names I don’t recall. We played teams like Kiski Prep, the McKeesport Tigers, a military academy . . . we even played at Western Penitentiary! When we entered that prison, they counted us as we went in and counted us as we went out.”

“I imagine the prison team’s fans were pretty rough on your team, eh?” I said.

“Actually, the prisoners in the bleachers were rooting for us,” Jim laughed as he remembered the scene. “They yelled things like, ‘Get him! He’s a stool pigeon!’”

It was 1950 when Jim, who was in his late thirties and had three children, and several other fellows decided that Brownsville should have a youth baseball league. They met to organize the league, and thanks to a simple coin toss that Jim Ashton won at that meeting, he began a twenty-five-year career managing the Optimist Club Brownsville Little League team.

Kevin Park is just one of the boys Jim coached who enthusiastically attests to the lasting impression that “Mr. Ashton” made on his players. Next, Jim shares some of his memories of twenty-five years of dealing with kids, parents, other coaches, and fans as a Brownsville Little League manager.

COIN FLIP SPARKED A QUARTER-CENTURY MANAGING CAREER

In 1950, thirty-six-year-old Jim Ashton attended a meeting of community leaders who were interested in creating a Little League in Brownsville.

“There were about twelve of us at the meeting,” Jim told me in a conversation last month. “The president of the Optimist Club told us he would like to sponsor a team if he could find a manager. Two of us said we would be willing to manage his team. He said, ‘I can’t pick between the two of you. Does one of you want to be manager and the other a coach?’

“When neither of us said anything, he said, ‘I’ll toss.’ He tossed a



Jim Ashton managed the Optimist Club team in the Brownsville Little League for twenty-five years. Pictured here is his 1967 league championship team. From left to right, front row (kneeling): Scott Elias, Lenny Pasquale, Leslie Knox, Tony Harrison, Don Sawyer, and Chuck Rupenthal. Second row (kneeling): Coaches Larry Pasquale and Frank Novotney. Back row: Manager Jim Ashton, Howard Johnson, “Kingfish,” A. J. Novotney, Larry Pasquale, Howard Thomas, Don Thompson, Ray White, Rick Curcio, and Coach Jack Rupenthal.

coin and said, ‘Ashton, you’re the manager, he’s the coach.’ As it turned out, the other fellow refused to be a coach.”

“But you became manager of the Optimist Club team?”

“Yes. I managed the team for twenty-five years, until my son Jimmy began playing shortstop for the Brownsville Area High School team. I wanted to go see him play, but I couldn’t practice and play my Little League team at the same time, so I gave up the Little League.”

“Who else helped when Brownsville Little League was formed in 1950?”

“Bob Petriello, Jack Rohland, and Chris Lochinger were three of them,” Jim said, naming a few of the original organizers. “Chris owned the Chevrolet garage and was the first league president. When he retired as league president, Jack Rohland took over, then it went to Frank Ricco.

“I give Frank a lot of credit, because he was involved a long time. He would take our players on his buses to Pittsburgh to see the Pirates

play and didn't charge the league anything. When the team went to Williamsport, he took us up there for a whole week and drove us around. He also helped with the ball field and helped the sponsors put up fences.

"Bob Petriello was a great friend to the league too. Bob was the sports editor at the *Telegraph* for many years, and he gave the Little League a lot of nice write-ups.

"And I can't forget to mention John Fenwick, who took care of the field [Fenwick Park]. That park was built when the league began in 1950, and Fenwick, who is no longer living, began taking care of it then. He lived right by the field, and he was there all day long, fixing it up."

"During your twenty-five years with the Optimist Club team, did you eventually have the opportunity to manage your own sons?"

"Both of my sons, Bill and Jim, played baseball for my Optimist teams," Jim nodded. "In my years as manager, I went through a couple hundred ball players for Optimist Club."

Jim learned that some of those players were determined to play, no matter what obstacle presented itself.

"I had a boy on the team who pitched for us one day," Jim said. "After the game was over, he took his jersey off, and we saw he had a cast on his arm. He had fallen from a tree and broken his wrist, but he didn't want us to know because he wanted to pitch.

"Naturally, there were a few injuries over the years. I recall when Pat Mullen's boy, Mike, was on my team, and he threw a curve ball and broke his arm, right there on the mound. Pat was in the stands, and he took Mike to the hospital."

"It was fortunate Pat was there," I said. "I imagine some parents were more involved in their sons' Little League activities than others."

"I had many good parents over the years," Jim said. "Mr. and Mrs. Craft, who owned the Dairy Queen, often invited us to the Dairy Queen for ice cream after the ball game. Mr. and Mrs. Guerrieri from Republic, whose boy was on our team, wrote all the kids' birthdays down. After the game, if one of the boys had a birthday, they invited us over to their home and had a birthday party.

"But a lot of parents never saw their boys play," Jim said. "I would go pick them up, take them home, and treat them at the refreshment stand after every game."

"Out of your own pocket?"

"Yes, I'd do that out of my own pocket. The kids were supposed to pay for their own ball caps, but I often paid for their caps. The kids used to sell candy to help pay for their uniforms. Well, some kids ate it themselves or didn't turn their money in, so I paid for their candy."

"Sounds like you invested more than just time during those twenty-

five years.”

“Oh, I did,” Jim laughed. “During the years when I was managing, we often ate late suppers and missed some vacations. But I enjoyed managing.”

“Jim, you’ve told me that your grandchildren are involved in youth sports leagues, and you still attend many of their games and matches. Do you notice a difference between youth sports today as compared to when you managed your Optimist Club teams in the ’50s and ’60s?”

“When I was managing, I played the best boys,” Jim answered without hesitation. “To win the game, you have to play your best players. That’s just baseball. But not now. Nowadays you have to play everybody for so many innings.”

“I wonder,” I said, “if that properly prepares those young people to deal with the competition they will face in their future lives. Life may not always be so generous in the real world.”

“I agree. I had a boy on my team who couldn’t catch, but his dad asked me to play his son more often. I told him I was trying to play my best players to win the game, but I said, ‘OK, I’ll play him tonight.’ I put him in the outfield, and a fly ball was knocked out there. He went to catch it, and it hit him in the face. After the game, the dad came over and said, ‘I see what you mean, Jim.’

“I had another boy who threw his helmet when the umpire called him out. I walked out there and said, ‘Go get that helmet.’ When he refused, I said, ‘If you don’t, you’re out of the game.’

“He didn’t want to go out of the game, so he went over, picked the helmet up, and brought it in. After the game was over, his dad came over to me and said, ‘I’m glad you did what you did.’”

We all know that a big league manager feels pressure when his team plays poorly, because he can be fired. But really . . . what kind of pressure could there be on a Little League manager?

Jim clued me in.

“When I worked in the mine at Maxwell,” he told me, “the mine foreman came to me before we picked the players one season. ‘Jim,’ he said, ‘you know where you work. I have a boy trying out for Little League this week. Be sure you pick him.’

“Well, when I saw his boy, he was about that high and that broad [gesturing]. He couldn’t even bend over. So I didn’t pick him. The foreman said, ‘I’m going to get you fired,’ but as it turned out, he didn’t have the power to get me fired.”

The days of managing Little League are long past for ninety-year-old Jim Ashton, but the man is still remarkably active.

“How do you keep busy these days?” I asked him.

“I watch TV,” Jim laughed, “and I try to keep up with my grandchildren. I have three children, nine grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. My wife Betty and I have been married for sixty-three years, and we live near my two sons near Philadelphia, where they bought us a home. They pick me up on Saturday mornings and we go out for breakfast, then to their kids’ ball games.”

“And I know you’re justifiably proud of the successful careers that your three children have made for themselves.”

Jim nodded. “My oldest, Donna Ashton Hoffman, lives near Pittsburgh and is with the finance department at Cochran Hyundai/Nissan. Bill is fifty-four and is a vice president at Amgen, a pharmaceutical company. Jim, who is forty-six, is Chief Executive Officer of SunGard Trading and Risk Systems.”

A few days after I spoke with Jim at the Uniontown home of his sister-in-law, Ruth Mays, he and Betty traveled to Pittsburgh where they visited with their daughter for a few days. Then they boarded a train for home, disembarking just a mile or so from their home, ready to resume their active lives.

For Jim, who revels in describing the accomplishments of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, that means busy evenings and weekends attending youth baseball, football, and soccer games. He sits in the stands and cheers, just as many proud grandparents did for so many years at Fenwick Park, where a gentleman named Jim Ashton trained their grandchildren in the virtues of sportsmanship, fair play, and the great game of baseball.