



YOUR MONEY

How do you manage?: Hardball all week, then baseball - with an accent

By JENNIFER CONLIN APRIL 16, 2005

At first glance, it looks just like a Little League opening day anywhere in America. Hundreds of boys and girls cover the field dressed in spanking new baseball hats and jerseys bearing the logos of more than a dozen Major League teams (Mets, Mariners, Giants and Red Sox, to name just a few). Twenty-one baseball diamonds stretch off into the distance, ready for the seven divisions - including T-Ball and Coaches Pitch for the youngest - to get in position to play ball.

Funneling out of a fleet of SUVs, many festooned with U.S. college stickers, is a parade of parents carrying L.L.Bean canvas bags, fold-up field chairs and tall Starbucks lattes to go.

A close look off to the right, however, reveals the London Eye slowly revolving on the horizon. The baseball mitts, bats, and other bits of equipment arrived in England on an American Airlines flight from Chicago in 83 different boxes weighing a total of 2,200 pounds, or 998 kilograms.

The 640 children warming up, most of them American, have more foreign stamps in their passports than stickers plastered on their school notebooks. And the parents organizing the league and coaching the teams are global titans in their professional fields, sent to London to represent banks, law firms, corporations, and consulting firms on the playing fields of Europe and beyond.

"We joke that every American investment banker and lawyer in London is here on the weekends," said Donald Guiney, the lead commissioner of LondonBaseball, which opened the 2005 season on Sunday, April 10.

"If there were an earthquake on the field, it could affect the world economy," Guiney said.

Just as Parents' Night at an elite school often has the feel of a cocktail party, with adults socializing and networking, the weekend baseball games at the Wormwood Scrubs field in West London (which shares the name with the high-security walled prison that borders the field) have the camaraderie of a giant tailgate party. While the focus among both children and parents is firmly on baseball, not work, the games are, in all likelihood, the most powerful corporate gathering in Europe next to Davos.

The list of commissioners alone is impressive. Mark Crandall, a former oil trader, is the son of Robert Crandall, the former chairman of American Airlines; hence the sponsorship help in flying equipment across the Atlantic. John Anderson is head of communications for Barclays Capital, which sponsors the uniforms. Mike Molinaro, global head of learning and development for Deutsche Bank's technology and operations division, handles information technology issues, including the league Web site (www.Londonsports.com).

John McMahon, an executive with Sony Pictures, was given the job of designing the T-shirts sold at each game since he hails from California and "we thought he knew more than the rest of us about fashion," said Guiney, whose day job is as a partner at the British law firm of Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer.

Yet despite the high-powered parents, the league is anything but competitive. In fact, Guiney specifically instructs the parent coaches to leave their aggressive side behind when they walk out onto the field.

"I tell them if you don't win enough at work, that is your problem, but don't bring that attitude out onto the field or you won't make a good coach," Guiney said. "Our mission here is to take a hard game and get kids to feel good about themselves."

Michael Rosenberg, a hedge fund manager who is one of the league's coaches, said he believed that everyone took Guiney's message to heart.

"You have all these Type A bankers and lawyers out here," Rosenberg said. "It is an interesting crowd, but we leave that behind.

"You kind of have to," he added, "when you have kids on your team who might have been born in Connecticut but now have a British accent and have never played or even seen baseball played in their lives."

In fact, parent after parent at Opening Day 2005 echoed the sentiment that it took moving abroad to find an American Little League team for their children that represents the old-fashioned values of the game. "It is now so competitive in the States they have had to

put a ban on parents shouting during the games," said Sandi Balmer, who lived in New Mexico before relocating to London for her husband's oil and gas job. "The kids play 90 games a year, and not just on weekends like here."

Guiney reinforces the message in his opening season e-mail message to parents, in which he encourages them to "put down your Financial Times (or the equivalent)" and "connect with your kids by playing ball with them." To that end, parents are encouraged to "steal" baseballs and take them home from practice. "Any ball that sits in our container has no value," Guiney said.

Or, as he put it three days before Opening Day, "A parent might spend Friday afternoon pounding the table against some other parent as they hammer out a work deal. But deals are just deals. When they then see each other on the weekend throwing a ball with their kids, I think they realize that real life is not work."

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