

Ripken Domain Going International

By Keith Mills, Press Box

Cal and Bill Ripken didn't start playing baseball more than four decades ago just so they could later start an amateur baseball empire, but that's what happened.

And they may not have started Ripken Baseball 10 years ago to impact the next generation of college and professional players but, again, that's what has happened.

The brothers Ripken closed the curtain on yet another Cal Ripken World Series last weekend in Aberdeen, though with each passing year their influence on the game they love has carried over into high school and even the college and pro games.

For the last two years, Cal Jr. has assisted coach Larry Sheets at Gilman, helping the Greyhounds win the MIAA A Conference championship two years ago, and taking an active role in the young baseball career of his son, Ryan.

Just two weeks ago in Chicago, Bill Ripken coached one of the two teams in the Under Armour High School All-American Classic at Wrigley Field, a showcase event that included Ryan and featured the Orioles' Hall of Fame shortstop as a guest instructor.

"I had a chance to go there and work with the kids," Cal Jr. said, "give them some tips and routines that the big league guys use. But for the most part, I was a dad."

"He sat down at the other end of the dugout, away from me," joked Bill, who is an analyst for the Baseball Network, which aired the Under Armour game, "but I told the people at the network that if he got out of control I'd have to dismiss him from my dugout. But there he was with the players. Whether something happened good or bad, they'd be sitting next to Junior and they'd have a conversation for about a half-inning about what happened. It was all about introducing these kids to that next level, whatever that may be, Division I or pro ball for most of them."

Indeed, the talent level was so imposing in Chicago that virtually every one of the 36 players invited from around the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic will either play college baseball or sign professional contracts.

Ryan Ripken is among them.

"He had a wonderful time," Cal said of his 18-year-old son, now a 6-foot-6 left-handed senior first baseman at Gilman. "It proved a lot to him that he can compete at that level. Guys were throwing 90-92 (mph). You don't get that many reps at this speed at this level. It was a learning process, certainly a wonderful learning process for Ryan."

It has been 10 years since Ripken Baseball was born and to say it has evolved into a major force nationally in amateur baseball would be merely to call Cal a Hall of Famer.

He is an American icon, who is teaching the game to young players today who weren't even born when he broke Lou Gehrig's consecutive games record in 1995.

He also has become the country's unofficial ambassador to baseball, visiting China, Nicaragua and Japan, teaching the game to youngsters and spreading the gospel of baseball.

"Basically, we're spreading goodwill around the world through baseball," Cal said.

Nowhere was that more evident than last week in Washington, where Cal sat alongside Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at a reception for Japanese tsunami victims. Four days later, Cal and Bill welcomed the same group, plus the Japanese team playing in the Cal Ripken World Series, and a group of kids from the League of Dreams for a clinic at

the Ripken Complex in Aberdeen.

"Our relations are really good with Japan," Cal said. "I've been there three times working with kids and now it's a different mission with the earthquake and tsunami. Maybe we can provide a little bit of a distraction and a little bit of an uplift because we're tapping into the love of baseball.

"Baseball has healing properties when times are tough. You hear a lot of wonderful stories about baseball when times are tough. We're going back to Japan in November to do some clinics and work the kids, and they're going to take us into their communities."

It was the Japanese team that beat Lexington, Ky., 7-0, during this year's Ripken World Series title game, the 12th time a team has won a championship under the Ripken banner.

Originally named the Bambino Division of Babe Ruth Baseball, the first Ripken World Series was held in Mattoon, Ill., in 2000. Now, it's a huge part of the national and state amateur baseball landscape and a monster event for Aberdeen and Harford County.

It has come a long way -- from the inaugural Ripken World Series in Aberdeen when Bill Ripken helped to transform Ripken Stadium, home of the Aberdeen IronBirds, into a little league diamond with 60-foot base paths and the mandatory 40-foot distance from the pitcher's mound to home plate.

"I remember the days when we had to send the IronBirds on a 19-day road trip and we had three days to convert the field from big to small," Bill said. "We played 10 days and we'd convert it back from small to big in time so the IronBirds could back home and finish the season.

"It's grown pretty quickly, just the excitement and level of participation out here. Let's face it, not everybody wants to come out and watch 11- and 12-year-olds play baseball. But if you do come out and watch these kids, they make you forget they're 11 and 12. Some of the talent and the things these kids pull off is truly amazing."

Then there's the world aspect of the Cal Ripken World Series.

"You can't have a World Series until you bring the international teams over here," Bill said. "Until Cal put his name on this division of Babe Ruth baseball, it was just a United States championship. Now with Japan, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Korea, Canada, Australia coming in every year, hopefully we can expand it more on the international side. It is a universal game now."

And Bill Ripken is well aware of just how universal. He was the first base coach for the United States team in the 2009 World Baseball Classic and he is a huge part of the Ripken Baseball operation.

Along with his wife Candace, he's raising four children in Harford County -- 17-year-old Miranda, an outstanding basketball and softball player at John Carroll High School in Bel Air; Anna; Reese; and Jack -- and runs many of the organization's camps, at the Ripken complex in Aberdeen and Myrtle Beach, S.C., and throughout the country.

He is a superb teacher of the game, who breaks down the fundamentals in a way that's both fun and informative. He also joined Larry Bowa two weeks ago as managers of the Under Armour Baseball Classic at Wrigley Field.

"Billy got to manage my son," Cal said, "and that was great to be a part of. I just sat back and watched. It's a whole lot more nervewracking as a dad watching your kid perform than when you did. You can take those things in stride. You'd be mad about striking out, but you'd recover from it. As a dad, you live with every pitch."

Two years ago Ripken Baseball teamed with Kevin Plank and Under Armour to form a partnership now starting to have the impact both locally and nationally it has long had with amateur baseball at the youth level. The 2011 Under Armour Combine for high school players was held on Sunday at the Ripken complex, while the Under Armour All American Classic showcases many of the nation's premier players.

Among them is Ryan Ripken, who according to his uncle and his manager performed well at Wrigley Field.

"Ryan's a pretty humble kid," Bill Ripken said. "He has a good understanding of what's going on in every sense. It's not easy growing up being Junior's son and following in those kinds of footsteps.

"He played a very good first base and hit the ball hard. And he made a really good judgment play, tagging up on a short fly ball and scoring a run for us. To see him out there with the best players, not just from this country, but from Puerto Rico and the Dominican and Canada, was pretty cool. He was one of the 36 kids who were out there on the field and he certainly belonged."

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