

City seen as global baseball mecca

Group looks to raise funds for facility to host annual youth event.

*By Reggie Hayes
of The News-Sentinel*

Darin Van Tassell has two international baseball events on his mind these days.

The first is the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, where he is the competition director for baseball. He's the point man for the world. That's kind of a big deal.

The second is a potential youth baseball development camp in Fort Wayne. He is one of a group pointing the world toward the Summit City. That could be a big deal, too.

"Anytime you talk about putting together something of this caliber, there has to be a lot of things that come together – synergy, if you will," Van Tassell said. "There's some synergy here, and it's happening on a lot of levels."

Van Tassell spent Friday and Saturday in Fort Wayne, where longtime friend and business partner Larry Bryant joined local organizers Caleb Kimmel and Steve Sotir in meeting with local community, business and government leaders about the World Baseball Academy (WBA).

The WBA's two-week event would bring players and youth coaches from around the world – one or two countries at a time – to participate in a baseball training and cross-cultural experience.

"The easiest part is bringing the international component to this," Van Tassell said. "The hard part is what Caleb and the folks in Fort Wayne can do to build a facility to host it.

"But that has some interesting synergy, too," Van Tassell said. "I went down and saw the footprint of the Wizards development (Harrison Square). Whatever folks think the impact of that will be, they probably should triple it. There are revitalization projects, and then there's that. To me, that will be phenomenal."

The four WBA leaders had originally planned to meet in Atlanta, but Van Tassell and Bryant, who live in Statesboro, Ga., wanted to visit Fort Wayne to get a better feel for the community. It was Van Tassell's first time in the city. Bryant had visited twice before. They met with a number of local leaders, including city councilman Tim Pape.

Kimmel is the owner of Between the Lines, a baseball instructional and tournament hub. As the WBA's director and primary catalyst, he will spearhead local fundraising to renovate the baseball complex at the Ash Centre, 1701 Freeman St.

The goal is to have the facilities updated and the first WBA event in 2010. An estimated \$1.5 million to \$2 million renovation will ultimately be required to bring the facilities up to date for the nonprofit event.



From Left To Right: Caleb Kimmel,
Darin Van Tassell, Larry Bryant, Steve Sotir

Van Tassell, Bryant and Sotir have worked together many times as coaches in international baseball settings. They first met about 20 years ago at Georgia Southern University. Sotir is the athletic director for Woodside and Summit middle schools, as well as the Homestead High School baseball coach.

Van Tassell and Bryant said Sotir's belief in the project was all they needed to climb aboard. Most recently, Sotir served as head coach and Bryant as lead assistant at the World Children's Baseball Fair in Puerto Rico in August.

"If Steve were going to a barn burning, I'd join him," Bryant said. "...If the city government, county government, community and business leaders can embrace this and feel what it's all about, it's very doable. It'll be recognized at some point throughout the nation as starting in Fort Wayne."

Van Tassell said he could see the facility being used for a country's pre-Olympic base if Chicago were to win the rights to host the 2016 Olympic Games. He also said Fort Wayne's summer weather is more conducive to international events than hotter southern states would be. "If it were in Georgia, we'd have to shut down from 11 (a.m.) to 4 (p.m.) because of the heat," Van Tassell said.

Van Tassell also said the renovated facilities at the Ash Centre would ultimately be more valuable during the time when no international events were taking place.

"There will be a legacy that will get formed," Van Tassell said. "It might be that the World Baseball Academy during two weeks in the summer generates phenomenal buzz. But the legacy is those facilities are in place to do far more important and meaningful things, and I think that's the reason to get excited."

Sports summary

WBA gains commitment

Plans for the World Baseball Academy in Fort Wayne are moving full speed ahead. Darin Van Tassell, one of the group's leaders, has received oral commitments from baseball federations in Australia, the Netherlands and Puerto Rico to attend the event when it begins, projected to be in 2010.

The WBA will be a teaching and cross-cultural experience for international youth baseball organizations to come to Fort Wayne and take part in training and competition. It is predicated on a renovation to the ASH Centre, 1701 Freeman St., to house the event.

"The next step is to finish the master planning with Design Collaborative and then put into place the strategies and fundraising mechanisms to renovate the facility," said Caleb Kimmel, the WBA's director of operations.