



Inside the Little League Baseball summer camp experience.

A Summer Dream

By Chris Smith

Jeff Yasalonis lives in Philadelphia, and has always been a serious Phillies fan; he worships Chase Utley. But here is how much Jeff, 12, loved attending Little League Baseball's summer camp in Williamsport, Pa.: He didn't mind wearing the Pittsburgh Pirates' colors for the week he was there.

The summer camps — whether in Bristol, Conn.; Hillsgrove, Pa.; or Williamsport — teach all the fundamentals of the game. But perhaps their most distinctive aspect is how they encourage kids to dream. In Williamsport, that extends all the way to the sleeping quarters; there are eight cabins, and each one is named after a different team, including the Orioles, the Yankees and the Mets. Campers play for that team, and change into their uniforms in locker rooms decorated in the Big League squad's colors.

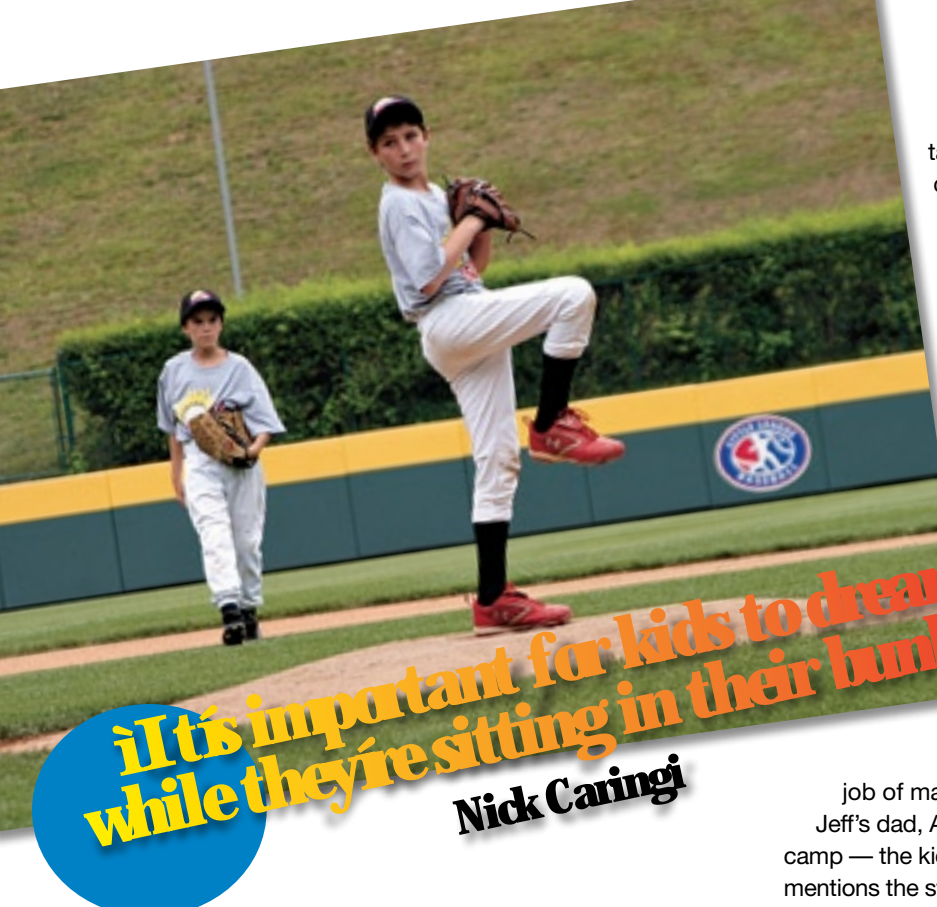
"It was a little tough at first to be a Pirate," Jeff says. "But the camp is so cool that it didn't really matter."

Little League International launched its summer camp program 48 years ago in Williamsport. The Hillsgrove facility was added in 1969, and the camp in Bristol, which was named in honor of the late MLB Commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti, opened in 1993. The camps run from late June to mid-August;

kids ages 9–14 can attend, with some variations depending on the location. Each camp features multiple baseball fields and instruction provided by high school and college players and coaches, as well as coaches from Little League's staff. They're all guided by the same principle: fun.

"That's the most important thing, beginning from when campers wake up," says Nick Caringi, the director of Little League's summer program. "Yes, we work hard on baseball skills and our philosophy is serious: Everyone, no matter how much they've played before they come to camp, needs to work on the fundamentals. But the coaches know that kids learn more when





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Nick Caringi

they're enjoying what they're doing, and the camp day is structured to provide plenty of ways to have fun." With that in mind, there is free time in the middle of the day, with choices such as swimming and ping-pong, plus a canteen where kids can hang out, munch on snacks and trade baseball cards.

"One of the best things was meeting kids from all over," says Brooklynite Vincent Amato, 13. "There were kids from Florida, California — even Canada!"

The entire weekly package, from instruction to food to bed linens, costs just \$395. "Directors of other camps say, 'What's wrong with you guys? How come you charge so little?'" Caringi says. "We want to make sure all kids can afford it."

The coaches use many proven methods for teaching the game, like putting wooden blocks — instead of gloves — on infielders' hands to instill the concept of having "soft" hands while fielding. But kids get to try some cutting-edge technology as well; equipment manufacturers often provide the camps with prototype bats, bases and balls to see how they work under real-life conditions.

The camps also sneak instruction in that's disguised as fun, like Wiffle ball games. In July, activities end early so campers can gather to watch MLB's annual Home Run Derby and All-Star Game. "It's important for kids to dream while they're sitting in their bunks," Caringi says.

Certainly the settings help. The Bristol camp takes place at Little League's eastern regional center, whose ballparks are featured on TV every summer during the qualifying rounds of Little League's championship tournament. And the Williamsport diamonds, particularly Howard J. Lamade Stadium, have become famous as the sites of the Little League World Series. "That was amazing, to play games on the field you see on TV," Jeff Yasalonis says. "And getting to play any position I wanted to try."

His parents have only one regret: Jeff, their youngest child, is the third and last son they'll be sending to the camp. "With our boys, we've experienced all kinds of camps," says Jeff's mom, Nancy. "And Little League is absolutely the best 'first' camp for a kid. The coaches and counselors do such a great

job of making them feel at home and protected."

Jeff's dad, Alan, describes one highlight of the Williamsport camp — the kids' visit to the Little League Museum — and mentions the strand of string that weaves through the complex. It's the unraveled stuffing of a baseball, but it's an important metaphor, too. "It's a string connecting the legacy and history of baseball, from Babe Ruth to your own son," Alan says. "But the spirit of the camp? That can't be captured in any way except in the laughter and smiles on the kids' faces." ♦

Chris Smith is a contributing editor at New York magazine.

For more information or to register for 2009 Little League Summer Camp, log on to www.LittleLeague.org/Learn_More/About_Our_Organization/Baseball_Camps.htm or contact Camp Secretary Terri Hicks at 570-326-1921, ext. 225 or e-mail thicks@LittleLeague.org.



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