

Fields: Recreation sites sorely needed

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A foul ball away from one of baseball's great dynasties, the sport is practically foreign to kids in the neighborhood.

Youngsters who live near Turner Field, home of the Atlanta Braves, don't have safe, maintained fields on which they can learn to play the game. They rarely see the team, except on TV.

"It's hard to find any field that doesn't have glass or anything in it," said pitcher Arsenio Clemmons, 15, who learned the sport this year on his high school team — the winless Carver Panthers.

"At first I didn't know you could steal bases," he said. "I thought you could only do that in the major leagues." He has been to one Braves game.

At noon today, the Braves and corporate sponsors will rally to change the landscape by breaking ground on four fields of dreams a mile south of the ballpark.

The Braves Baseball Academy, next to the Villages at Carver Family YMCA, is intended to help revitalize what was once an infamous housing project — Carver Homes. It's like golf sparking renewal in East Lake. "Baseball with a purpose," YMCA Vice President R.c. Pruitt calls it.

The \$2.4 million baseball facility, with four fields on eight acres, is scheduled to be ready for kids to use by Opening Day 2006. Supporters say it will help fill a gap common to most American major league cities: Baseball, for urban kids, is striking out.

"We looked at cities like Atlanta, Houston, Los Angeles, and you saw the numbers continually dropping," said David James of Little League Baseball and Softball's Urban Initiative Program, which is in discussion to operate baseball leagues at Atlanta city parks.

"Kids aren't signing up. There weren't adult volunteers. It was hard to meet budget needs and people can't get the support. People asked us, 'Why won't our kids come out and play?' "

The number of kids playing baseball dropped from a peak of 16 million in 1995 to 11 million in 2003, according to an American Sports Data survey.

The sport in inner cities mirrored that trend, said Tom Brasuell, Major League Baseball's vice president of community affairs, who oversees the "RBI" program — Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities.

"Kids in those areas have a harder time getting materials and tools to start baseball than suburban kids who have well-groomed fields and a better family structure and better economic base," he said Monday.

"It's a nationwide epidemic," said Matthew Ryan, senior director of club services for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Atlanta. He oversees seven clubs within three miles of Turner Field, serving about 7,000 kids, but no baseball fields. They are too expensive to build and maintain, he said.

"Here we are next to one of the best baseball fields with one of the greatest teams, and we can't get kids to pick up baseball," he said.

A Carver Panthers game reveals the distance between baseball and kids in the Braves' pocket of southeast Atlanta.

For a couple of seasons, the Panthers played every "home" game away because their school lacked a field, coach Richard Elder said.

"We used to play a lot of sandlot baseball and watch baseball on TV. These kids don't do as much as we did," said assistant coach Chris Belcher. "That was before video games as well." Panther coaches must teach fundamentals to athletes as old as 17 who haven't played before. Some had grasped the rudiments by playing a street game called Any Hop, using a tennis ball so nearby cars won't get damaged.

"Nobody on this team grew up playing baseball," said Antoine Turner, 17, a pitcher. "Most of us are football players. I never played any organized baseball."

A few blocks and a world away, four Braves players — Brian Jordan, Mike Hampton, Chipper Jones and John Smoltz — each pitched in \$75,000 toward building the new fields.

Jordan recalled playing stickball at age 6 in alleys of Baltimore "with an old shirt for second base" until his parents drove him to a real field.

"We worried about rocks and falling on the concrete," he said. "Baseball is a game you can create . . . but there's a huge need in the inner city. There's not enough ballfields to keep kids busy and going in the right direction."

"When kids have a nice outlet, who knows what would happen," said Hampton, whose coach father drove him to fields in Florida that Hampton's sons now play on. "Baseball was my way out."

The Braves players will trade their caps for hard hats at today's ceremony. Like divisional titles, baseball's comeback here requires teamwork.

With charitable proceeds from the 2000 All-Star game, the Braves hooked up with the Metro Atlanta YMCA, which was building an \$11.5 million facility at Carver near a big ravine where the ballfields will go.

"The hardest thing was finding the dirt," said YMCA vice president Robyn C. Furness. "Baseball needs a lot of dirt, and much of the dirt in our city is going to other things."

Along with the players, major donors included the Braves Foundation (\$500,000) and Baseball Tomorrow (\$144,352), a charity funded by major league players.

Because adult volunteers are crucial to organized youth baseball, the YMCA asked Atlanta companies for money and volunteers to help coach the kids. BellSouth, Cingular, Home Depot, Delta Air Lines, Coca-Cola and UPS agreed to do both.

Carver kids have mixed feelings about a new place for playing what is a new sport to many of them. After school Monday, elementary students took a break from playing dodgeball on a wedge of grass to talk baseball.

"My cousin could teach me how to pitch," said Marquez Jackson, 10, who said he's played baseball using his family's mop or dustpan as a base. "I got a bat and glove and a tennis ball, but my cousin is using my tennis ball right now."

Meyonta Grissom, 8, the grandniece of former Braves outfielder Marquis Grissom, had a lot to say in favor of the game. "If you strike out, it ain't nothing; you get to play again next time," she said. "You get to hit home runs and run across the field, and you get to put on T-shirts. We don't have a good place to play here."