

Mays enjoys All-Star stickball in Harlem

Hall of Famer watches New York youngsters learn classic game

By Willie Bans / MLB.com

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NEW YORK -- Willie Mays took the megaphone, brought it to his face and admitted that after a long flight from San Francisco the day before, "I'm tired, man."

But he still made it to a schoolyard in Harlem on Sunday morning to watch the 2008 All-Star Youth Stickball Tournament between children from Harlem RBI, a youth development program, the New York Emperors Stickball League and the Kips Bay Boys & Girls Club.

"I went to bed at about one and woke up at about three," Mays said. "I couldn't sleep, because I knew that if I overslept, the kids that are here would be disappointed."

They weren't. The event featured one game, which was a 9-9 tie, but the emphasis was on learning the basics and having fun.

Fitted in new shoes and T-shirts from Nike, the children ranged from 7-14 years old. They competed in front of a giant black-and-white photo of Mays playing stickball in Harlem, where the Hall of Famer would sometimes play with neighborhood children as a member of the New York Giants.

"I think everybody knows that when I came to New York from Alabama, I didn't know anything about New York City," Mays said. "But New York has treated me so well.

"When you can, 50 years later, say we're still talking about stickball, I think it's wonderful."

Before the teams played, they were shown the rules by the coaches, and the boundary lines were created with chalk on the pavement.

After the lessons, the players were ready to go, huddling to discuss strategy and concluding it with a team chant that captured the event's theme:

"1-2-3, RBI," the Harlem RBI team shouted. "4-5-6, fun!"



Before taking the field, the Harlem RBI team chanted, "1-2-3, RBI, 4-5-6, fun!" (Bob Mitchell/MLB.com)

As the game progressed, notable figures showed up, such as U.S. Representative Charles Rangel, whose district includes Harlem, and Robert Jackson, a Manhattan city councilman.

"It's about history, it's about teaching [the children] about Major League Baseball and icons like Willie Mays," said Jackson, who played stickball when he was younger. "And teaching them that with the game of stickball, you can grow to be the greatest in the world."

Cy Lippold, 11, of the Emperors Stickball League said she's been playing stickball for years and typically plays the outfield. She enjoyed herself and appreciated that her team got to participate in All-Star Week.

"I think it's amazing that kids get to experience it the same way the adults get to experience it," Lippold said.

Angel Quinones, an assistant director of Stickball for Kids who helped coach the children, said it's events like Sunday's that help keep children occupied.

And getting a chance to meet Mays, he said, was a bonus.

"I couldn't sleep last night thinking about it," Quinones said. "This is all great."

Willie Bans is an associate reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.