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## **Baseball clinic a hit with kids**

By Kevin Beese Contributor

Former Los Angeles Dodgers second baseman Jack Perconte, talks with young baseball players during a baseball clinic at Triton College, featuring former Major League players. The event was sponsored by the Hanover Insurance Group. | Photo courtesy of Hanov

Video games may be keeping your son from a multimillion-dollar deal, according to men who played baseball at the game's highest level.

Kids spending their summer on the couch with a joystick in hand instead of in the neighborhood park with a bat in hand is hampering the national pastime, according to members of the Major League Baseball Players Alumni Association who assembled at Triton College on June 9 for a youth baseball clinic.

When asked what needs to be done to get youth back focused on baseball, former Chicago Cubs pitcher Mike Remlinger, who pitched 14 years in the big leagues and made the 2002 National League All-Star team, simply said, "Get rid of video games."

"I would think the contracts these guys are getting today would get parents initiating their sons getting involved in baseball," said Milt Pappas, who pitched for the Cubs, Baltimore Orioles, Cincinnati Reds and Atlanta Braves during his 17-year career. "When you see guys making \$10 million, \$15 million a year, that should be incentive enough.

"When I started in 1957, the minimum salary was \$6,000. Now it is \$480,000. If you can play one of two years in the Major Leagues, you are set."

Pappas, the last player to throw a no-hitter at Wrigley Field (Sept. 2, 1972), said he remembers playing sandlot baseball as a youth from morning until the street lights came on at night.

"But there are girls and so many other interests that boys have now," Pappas lamented. "It's sad."

The clinic, sponsored by Hanover Insurance Group, gave Pappas reason for hope though.

"It's great to see," Pappas said of the 150 youth gathered for the clinic. "The American youth is still interested in baseball."

Pappas said by parents promoting the game, it will filter down to their sons. Continuing to follow a Major League team will keep attention on the game within a family and help foster a love of the sport with youth, Pappas stated.

John Martin, who won two World Series titles, was running a fielding drill and complimented Matthew Jensen of Schaumburg on his footwork.

Jensen listened attentively and then went to the back of the line.

“These guys have the experience,” Jensen said, when asked about being praised by a former big leaguer. “These guys have been there, put the work in and know what they are talking about.”

Former five-time All-Star Steve Sax flipped some baseballs to Craig Rowland, 13, and commented that the youth had “pop” in his bat. He then asked the Batavia teen, if we wanted to sign now or go to college.

“I’ve got power. I’ll work harder,” Rowland said referring to what Sax’s comments meant to him. “This is somebody who knows what to do. He can fix things or make you better.”

Sax said parents and coaches need to make baseball the sport for youth.

“They all stay home and play video games,” Sax said of the drop-off in baseball interest among young people. “There are so many options for youth today. You need to get the whole family involved in baseball.”

Bill Campbell, who pitched in the Majors for 15 years and twice was American League Reliever of the Year, said efforts like the Triton youth clinic are invaluable in getting baseball in the forefront of youth’s attention.

“You help kids understand the game, and it helps promote the game,” Campbell said. “We need to get the tide turned back toward the game.”

Jack Perconte, an infielder who played seven years in the Majors, including a stint with the Chicago White Sox, said efforts like the clinic are “on the right track.”

“You teach them to hit, to run, to play the game and they will be a fan of the game,” Perconte said. “Get them to try. You get them while they’re young and they’ll follow the game.”

Former Chicago Cub outfielder and pinch hitter Gene Hiser said getting youth playing the game is key. He remembers playing on a team where it was a double-header every Saturday and a triple-header every Sunday.

“We were 77-5 and we followed the (Baltimore) Oriole book (for how to play the game),” Hiser said. “You didn’t have the errors and mistakes that you see now in the Majors.”

Hiser said getting kids to play Wiffle ball with their parents in the yard is a way to start building interest in baseball.

“Let them have fun and play the game,” Hiser said. “That’s a good way to start.”

Keith Lavin, a Glen Ellyn parent, said the clinic is a great way for youth and former Major Leaguers to interact. For him, the clinic, now in its fourth year, has become an annual event.

“I’ve got a picture of Minnie Minoso tying a little girl’s shoe,” Lavin said. “The clinic has become a marvelous family day.”

Evan Werner, 6, of Lombard, didn’t know Bob Miller, who pitched five seasons in the Majors, was the youngest pitcher to ever beat the New York Yankees. He just knew it as a Major Leaguer who signed his baseball.

As he went through the autograph line, Werner looked at Miller and said, “Thank you, baseball player.”

At least for this day, baseball was still king.