

NM Little Leaguers get 1st Playoff Shot

By Ed Friedrich, Sun Sports Writer — Jul 12, 1989

* Talkative kids like Oakland, Ken Griffey Jr.

All that separates North Mason's Little Leaguers from the thousands of others who'll compete in District 2 tournaments this weekend at Port Angeles, Hadlock and Poulsbo is precedence. They have none.

Other than that, players from the first-year league are like any others – crazy about Ken Griffey Jr., not too high on the Seattle Mariners, hoping to qualify for the state tournament and dreaming of hitting a home run along the way.

No shocks there. But interviewed after a practice at Sand Hill Fields, it was surprising how open and eager the 11- and 12-year olds were to talk, to the point of pinning the reporter to a chain link fence.

So what'd they say?

That center fielder Ken Griffey Jr. has captured the area youth like no other Mariner, perhaps like no other Seattle pro. These kids can relate to "The Kid," who's just seven years older than some of them. Almost all of them named him as their favorite player or, at the least, their favorite Mariner.

The Mariners weren't as wholeheartedly embraced, although the home team edged Oakland as the most frequently named favorite.

When North Mason, which in its first season divided 256 players into four major league, give minor league, and 10 t-ball teams, makes its tournament debut Friday at 4 p.m. against South Kitsap Eastern at Port Angeles, it'll be wearing Athletic uniforms. Each of the four major league teams donned replica uniforms this year. Besides the Athletics, there were the Cubs, Mets and Mariners. And though the Mariners won the league title, the players chose to wear the Athletics' green and gold for the post-season play.

The New York Yankees were the favorite of two players and the Giants, Dodgers, Mets, Texas, and Boson each got one vote.

Although Seattle topped Oakland seven votes to five, just as many disliked the M's as liked them. The reason? Because kids follow winners.

"They don't do very good and I don't like a lot of their players," said Woody Bell, an 11-year-old pitcher/first baseman who prefers the Mets and Dodgers. "They're not good and nobody else likes them," concurred pitcher Justin Maressa, an Oakland fan. Another Athletics' fan, 11-year-old Jacob Manning said he doesn't like the M's because "they lose a lot."

But Seattle fan Jeff Rothenberg, son of coach Steve Rothenberg, and catcher/second baseman, says the Mariners "are hot" and infielder Chad Sparber, although he'd rather watch the Yankees, noted that since (the M's) got Ken Griffey Jr. I like them better."

Besides Griffey, Oakland blasters Jose Canseco and Mark McGwire were the most popular players. A couple kids also named Athletics catcher Terry Steinbach. San Francisco's Kevin Mitchell and Will Clark each got two votes. Others named were Yankee first baseman Don Mattingly, Red Sox third baseman Wade Boggs, Dodger pitcher Orel Hershiser, and former Mariner pitcher Mark Langston.

Among the favorite Mariners were Alvin Davis, Harold Reynolds and Dave Valle.

What could get these idols in hot water with these fans would be gambling. The Little Leaguers didn't have a lot of forgiveness for Pete Rose.

"I think they should chuck him, throw him in the slammer," said first baseman Tyson Pothier, son of manager Ken Pothier and the most critical of the Cincinnati manager who's been accused of gambling. "Cheating on his team, that's pretty stupid."

But Sparber said to "leave him alone. Everybody bets." Bell advocates suspending him for a year or two but not for life and Rothenberg says not only should Rose be allowed to keep managing but should be voted to the Hall of Fame.

North Mason Little League was formed out of a rift with the Kitsap County Pee Wees. Some believed the pee wees overemphasized winning at the expense of participation. That resulted in a split and the rise of a unique Little League program in which standings

aren't kept. The philosophy has spilled over to the players' approach to district this weekend.

Young Rothenberg said, "I think I'm going to have some fun and do my best."

Emilee Cagwin, who turns 11 on Monday, is the youngest player on the team. She's also the only girl who played in the major league. "I just want to go up there and play," said the pitcher/second baseman who claims to be the "nicest and cleanest" player on the team. "I'm lucky I even got there. That I'm a girl made problems, I think. I'm glad I got on this team and I don't care if we lose."

The freckle-faced Cagwin, the most articulate speaker on the team, switched from fastpitch softball last year to Little League baseball because her younger brother, Gabe, a precocious 9-year-old who snuck into the interviews and would've made the all-star team had he been old enough, was playing baseball.

Pothier possess enough confidence for the entire team. He says North Mason is going to kick some rear ends in Port Angeles and "compared to us, (the other teams) are going to stink.

"I see myself up there, I'm up at bat, two strikes on me, bases loaded. I SWINNNNG, and I miss," he imagined. "No, actually I see myself hit the ball. All of a sudden it's slow motion. It's a home run over the fence."

— *Update: North Mason lost its first game 25-0, and its second game 22-0, in the double-elimination tournament.*