

Quickball in the News

Weather
Hot with
drizzle of
rain
High: 90°
Dew: 78°

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Baseball's never been this fast.

By Scott Keeper
STAFF WRITER

Imagine, if you dare, "perfect" baseball.

No outs, no delays, no controversial calls, no batters adjusting and re-adjusting their caps, no pitchers fondling rosin bags between every pitch. In short, just non-stop fun.

Say hello to Quickball. Savoya Breeze, a sixth-grader at Bryson Middle School, did Monday morning. "It's a lot of fun and a good chance for me to get to play," said Breeze, who slapped a hit in each of her at-bats. "I'm gonna start playing softball this summer."

Quickball, a downsized version of baseball or softball that features fast-paced action, equal opportunity and plenty of fun, was brought to the Upstate Monday courtesy of the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation of Baltimore, Md., as part of the group's 25-city Play Ball! Tour for Kids.

The Foundation is a non-profit group founded in 2001 by members of the Ripken family in memory of their patriarch, Cal Sr., who died of lung cancer in 1999 after a 37-year career as a player, coach and manager with the Baltimore Orioles.

Representatives of the Foundation are visiting 25 cities during the 10-week tour that began in Nashville, Tenn., on Jan. 6, and presenting Quickball sets and baseball and softball equipment to local school systems as well as to local Boys and Girls Clubs of America. Quickball sets and equipment totalling approximately \$40,000 were presented to Greenville County Schools and the Greenville Boys and Girls Club.

Sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students at Bryson Middle School were introduced to the game of Quickball in the morning, and listened intently as Angel Natal, program operations coordinator for the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation, explained the four parts of "The Ripken Way": keep it simple, explain the why, make it fun, and celebrate the individual.

By incorporating this approach in their teaching, Natal, a former high school coach, said more youngsters will grow to appreciate the game. "We travel the country, trying to educate young men and women about the game of baseball," Natal

said. "Quickball is one way of doing that. It is a grassroots-level game that anyone of any skill level can play. Cal and Bill (Ripken) are adamant about keeping kids active and teaching them to pursue an active lifestyle."

There was no shortage of active lifestyle Monday morning. Quickball, which features outfield walls, plastic bats, a strike zone-backstop, and sponge balls, was quickly adopted by the students, and may figure prominently in their recreational futures. "I think they're going to want to play it all the time," said Betsy Johnson, a physical education instructor at Bryson Middle School. "It gets the entire gym involved, and it's a great thing to do on a winter day."

The inventors of the Quickball game -- brothers Chris and Keith Mackie of Winston-Salem, N.C. -- also were on hand to see their creation being appreciated. They said they got the idea for the game after growing tired of hearing repeatedly in the 1990s that kids were losing interest in baseball. "We developed the game and rules to make it fun for everybody, regardless of skill level," Chris Mackie said. "We also wanted to take some boredom out of the game."

Hence, the one-pitch, one-swing per person rule. This results in many more "at-bats" for many more kids. While on offense, each player gets in a fast-moving line and takes one swing -- hit or miss, they run to the back of the line to get ready for another at-bat. The spectators count down the final seconds of each timed batting period for the offense.

Outfielders are awarded points for catching hit balls. In short, everyone can get involved in the scoring, and there's no time to get bored. Rules can be adopted for indoor or outdoor play.

"We added the time element -- for a gym class, you need it to move fast," Keith Mackie said. "There's a lot more energy to the game, and you can score on offense or defense, which makes it fun, too. "Batters take one swing, then rotate to the back of the line. There's no time for anyone to be embarrassed. If you don't hit the ball, it doesn't matter, because you'll be back up there in a second."

Keith Mackie said that the first Quickball sets were snatched up by colleges and universities as part of their intramural programs, but in the past few years Quickball has become adopted by the Ripken Foundation as the official sport of Ripken Baseball. A Boys and Girls Club in Atlanta recently held a day-long Quickball tournament that attracted more than 100 participants. The same club also has reported an increase in attendance among kids who come to the Club solely to play Quickball. "It's all about just having a good time," Chris Mackie said. "You don't want the kids to have a bad experience and not want to do it again. It is success-based, it is inclusive, and that's what's important."