

Youth: Quickball catching on locally

By DANA OPPEDISANO

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Jim Doolen knew it would be like this, that the kids at the Boys & Girls Club of Collier County would take an instant liking to Quickball.

“You can see those faces,” the club’s assistant site director said with a smile. “Look at the girls. They didn’t even care what baseball was yesterday, and now they’re loving this.”

Doolen had envisioned the scene, the one that unfolded for two hours on Monday afternoon inside the club’s von Liebig Recreation Center, since he got back from the Cal Ripken Sr. complex in Aberdeen, Md., two weeks ago.

He’d flown there for a three-day orientation on not just the foundation, founded by brothers Cal and Bill to honor their late father, but likewise to learn the program’s mix of indoor baseball, basketball and dodgeball.

The game, Quickball, was taught to almost 200 Boys & Girls Club members by the foundation’s assistant director of programs, Jeff Breslin, and two others, who visited Naples as part of their 17-city “Play Ball Tour for Kids.”

More important than the bats and squishy balls, Breslin and his crew brought with them a check for \$40,000, in part to assist the local “Badges for Baseball” community crime prevention program, but also to help the Collier County chapter purchase new equipment, hire staff and fund other youth programs.

“First, it’s to get kids active,” Breslin said of their introduction to the game, “but the key is to take 10 minutes afterward to teach them about leadership, teamwork and other life skills that the Boys & Girls Clubs are teaching every day.”

The game, played with 10 on each side, puts one team up to bat for a determined period. On Monday, it was 1 minute, 30 seconds per side, and every swing — hit or miss — requires a run to first base.

“They all come back laughing,” Doolen said. “Remember when we were kids? If you swung and missed, you came back with your head down.”

A hit to a certain spot — say, off the wall or back at the pitcher — earns a designated number of points for the offense, while the defense earns points for the number of balls they collect in a bucket a few feet behind the pitcher.

“It’s great,” said 10-year-old Osmany Escoto, a student at Golden Terrace Intermediate School. “I got to hit the ball, and it’s better than (regular) baseball because you can’t get out.”

There were, as Doolen said, smiles all around.

Naples was selected for the tour — which began on March 31 in Fredericksburg, Va., and will hit Boys & Girls Clubs in Boston, Cleveland and Philadelphia, among other cities, before it ends on May 12 — when a Ripken Foundation team visited the local facility last year.

It was chosen, club President/CEO Mary Boyce-Johnson said, because of “the scope of what we’re doing and the growth we’ll have here in the next five years,” and Cal Ripken, Jr. took a follow-up tour of the local facility just last week.

“An amazing individual who seems at ease when he speaks to kids,” Boyce-Johnson said of the Hall of Famer. “Cal Ripken Sr. was very much about developing as an individual. Playing ball is great, but it’s a means to an end, and this gets them thinking that way. It teaches them teamwork and cooperation, and you take time throughout the game to ask them how they can apply those lessons to life.”

Boyce-Johnson and her crew will be helping them apply it all summer, when Quickball, the centerpiece of the Ripken Sr. Foundation’s “Healthy Choices, Healthy Children” initiative, is expected to become part of the regular curriculum. In addition, eight local representatives will be chosen to go to a tournament at the foundation’s complex in Maryland in the coming months.

“We’re just blessed to have them choose to stop in Naples,” Boyce-Johnson said. “It’s a great way to get kids who normally wouldn’t try baseball involved. We’re jumping right in and our kids are so excited.”

