

Family affair at Little League World Series

STMA volunteers celebrate 15th anniversary

Last month, the world's best youth baseball players from across the globe descended upon the idyllic rural setting of Williamsport, PA for the Little League World Series (LLWS). These exceptional athletes, ages 11 and 12, traveled with family and friends for the chance to be immortalized with teammates as the 2014 LLWS Champion.

Eight domestic and eight international teams battled in the summer heat from August 14 to 24. LLWS games are contested each year at two premier Little League Baseball (LLB) stadiums, Lamade and Volunteer, in Williamsport. Each venue features Kentucky bluegrass natural surfaces and can accommodate up to 3,300 spectators with an additional 30,000 fans on the hill. LLWS continues to be one of the most elite junior sporting events and remains free for all to attend.

The 88-acre baseball complex features six fields, including Lamade and Volunteer stadiums, one full-sized baseball field, two practice fields and one practice in-field. In addition to providing superior playing and practice surfaces, LLB facilities are also home to four dorms. Participants reside here during the 10-day tournament.

Since first televising the event in 1994, the global reach and recognition of LLWS has helped grow the sport. More than 70 million viewers tuned to ESPN, ESPN 2, ESPN 3, ESPN U and WATCH ESPN in August. The additional media coverage has put a premium on producing secure, playable and visually-appealing fields for TV viewers.

Seth Whitehill, head groundskeeper of the LLB complex, was hired in April 2011. He manages one-part time employee and one intern during the summer. For the LLWS, he directed 40 Sports Turf Manager Association (STMA) volunteers for 2 weeks surrounding the event.

"Our number one goal is providing a safe playing surface for the athletes," says Whitehill, an STMA member since 2011.

This year marks the 15th anniversary of STMA assisting Whitehill's grounds crew, with representation from multiple STMA regional chapters. Some members traveled from as far as California to contribute to the 10-day event, taking personal vacation days and time away from their families. In addition to daily mowing and painting lines, the volunteer turf team carefully watered each field, broomed the edges and made necessary repairs to the clay in the home plate circle and pitcher's mound.

Jeff Fowler, Academic Rep for STMA's Board of Directors, has helped every year since STMA got involved and, again, coordinated logistics this year with Whitehill for the volunteers. But this year was more special than most as Fowler was joined by his father, Don, and son, Evan.

"It was an exciting year for our family as three generations were represented," says Fowler, District Director for Penn State University's Cooperative Extension. "Sports turf has been a common bond for all of us and it was great to share quality time with them."

Fowler credits his Dad for getting him involved with LLWS. In 1995, the stadium's premier field was not in top condition. Don was nominated as the renovation coordinator for an extensive project of re-sodding and refurbishing LLB's stadium. He led and directed fellow Keystone Athletic Field Managers Organization (KAFMO) volunteers throughout the 782-hour process. The mini-major league facility debuted on August 24, 1996. Don's involvement and tireless efforts for nearly two decades has been instrumental to the success and popularity of LLWS.

Evan, Jeff's son, was a welcome addition to the grounds crew. He is a graduate of Penn State University and 2014 recipient of the James R. Watson Undergraduate Safer Athletic Field Environment Scholarship. Currently, he is an assistant groundskeeper with the Kansas

City Royals under STMA member Trevor Vance. Whitehill and the LLWS volunteers can credit this year's cohesion to three generations of Fowlers.

In addition to the STMA's milestone of 15 years of volunteer service, 2014 marks the 75th anniversary of LLB and the 68th anniversary for LLWS. The on-site LLB Museum was a hot attraction for tournament attendees.

LLB is the largest, best-funded youth sports organization in the world with 2.4 million players on 160,000 teams across 76 countries. This includes 1.9 million players and 5,500 leagues in the United States. Despite the major growth of the organization over the years, LLB remained true to its original purpose of being a member-oriented, service-driven non-profit that provides organization, insurance and other benefits to community leagues. It is operated solely by volunteers and guided by the principal that any child who wants to play will find a safe and structured place regardless of ability. ■



▲ **Jeff Fowler**, left, Academic rep for STMA's Board of Directors; his son, Evan, assistant groundskeeper with the Kansas City Royals; and Don Fowler, whose involvement and tireless efforts for nearly two decades has been instrumental to safe playing conditions for the Little League World Series.