

By:
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Sports for Kids

In Northern Manhattan

Over the loudspeaker the announcer prepares the runners for the 4x100 relay. "On your mark, get set, POP!" The gunshot signals the beginning of the race and off go the first of four boys representing the team at P.S. 128 along with boys from the Bronx and East Harlem. The crowd at the Armory cheers and supports the young runners as they make their way around the track, exploding with applause after the finish line is crossed. In the end, every child is awarded for their efforts.

Earlier this month the Armory was host to the USA Indoor Track & Field Championships, one of the world's most competitive and well-known events. To kick off the event, young New York City kids were invited to compete against one another in relays, giving them an extraordinary opportunity to share the stage with world-class athletes.

Mr. Bernie Cooper, Chairman of the New York Road Runners Club and sponsors of the 2002 USA Indoor track & field championship and the NYC Marathon commented that young athletes, "just need the exposure to large audiences and the excitement of competition. Especially winning a medal! This is a feeling that you don't get out in the streets. For some, it's their first exposure to something like this."

Involving kids in sports early in their lives is not only a way to keep them off the streets and participating in positive activities, but also helps them build strong and healthy minds and bodies.

According to studies by the Center for the Study of Sports in Society, a national organization aiming to increase awareness of sport and its relation to society, "Sports give children the opportunity to learn discipline, persistence and the power of teamwork and fair play. While the physical activity leads to building a healthy body, the lessons learned at a young age can lead to a healthy development of body and mind."

Fortunately, throughout Washington Heights and Inwood there are numerous organizations that focus on providing athletic activities to children as young as 6. Facilitated by the available park

space, the various local schools, and the recently renovated Armory, there are more options for local neighborhood children than ever before.

The Police Athletic League (PAL), which provides after-school programs in 17 full-time locations throughout the city, has a sports program at the Armory located at 216 Ft. Washington Ave (212-927-0306). Parents can register their kids for free anytime throughout the year but be warned it's very competitive to get into this program. PAL's Armory program provides opportunities to kids who desire to be coaches in sports such as basketball and track & field.

As a result of the wonderful parks in our area and fueled by the baseball spirit of the local Hispanic community, enrolling in a Little League organization has always been a favorite option for many youngsters.

A popular program in the neighborhood is the Ivy League, which in the summer organizes a girls softball league but throughout the year also offers basketball and volleyball. Founded in 1994, the league's goal is to provide athletic programming specifically for girls and young women, including activities which build self-esteem and confidence, promote academic achievement and provide knowledge to overcome peer pressures and social behaviors.

Registration for the Ivy League began this past Saturday for girls between the ages of 8 to 21 and will continue until the first week in April. League play begins April 16th and runs through June 15th. Enrollment is free for all girls and the commitment depends on the individual teams. During registration some of the girls were asked why they were enrolling in sports and the primary response was "because it is fun!" For more information, please contact Lara Leon at 212-305-9950 or check out their website at www.uptownwins.org.

Juan Marichal, the first Dominican and the second Latino baseball player (after Roberto Clemente) to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, also inspired a league aptly called 'Juan Marichal.' Registration



Above: The winning girls team of the Indoor Track and Field relay race.

Right: Registration day for the Ivy League W.I.N.S. girls softball league.

-Photos By Landa Towns

is open until the first week in May and the league runs from mid-May through September. Boys from the ages of 7 to 18 are welcomed to register. For more information, please visit their offices at 4022 10th Avenue (between 214th and 215th), Monday through Friday, from 5:30pm until 8pm or call 212-942-8399.

The fact that sports are fun was the same sentiment shared by the winning girls of the 4x100 relay team at the Armory two weeks ago. The most important aspect of participating in sports was that despite all the hardwork, it was mostly fun.

Manhattan Times had the opportunity to speak with 2x Olympic gold medalist and the fastest man in the world Maurice Greene. He shared that "the importance of sports in kids' lives is that it gives them something to do. It's fun and it allows them the opportunity to compete." Maurice Greene added, "Once kids start competing they may realize they enjoy it. [Parents] should let them have fun and do what they want to do."

Along with the positive emotional and physical gains made by kids when participating in sports there are also some precautions all athletes must consider.

Dr. Ron Noy, the attending orthopedic surgeon for the USA and World Indoor Champions advised, "the key is to have kids train properly. They should get together with their coaches and trainers and learn how



to warm up and stretch. Children should learn how to do their sport well."

Through his daily work with top-notch athletes, Dr. Noy has first-hand knowledge of sports related injuries. To prevent these, the main component to sports is warming up and knowing the mechanics of the sport. It is important to consider the environment of play too. "Kids may get hurt no matter how good they are if they have the wrong shoes and are playing on the wrong surfaces," Dr. Noy added.

Part of a healthy workout routine is the stretching. The chief therapist for the New York Road Runners Club suggests at least a 10-minute warm-up and a long stretching period after the activity to allow the muscles to flush out acids that build up during exercise.

Most importantly, parents shouldn't forget that eating habits also contribute positively to playing sports and leading healthy lives.

There is no doubt that a physically active routine contributes to the lives of kids. Now that summer is approaching parents should consider the many sports programs that are available throughout the neighborhood. Kids will have fun and gain invaluable experience in the process.