

Baseball brings enthusiasm to orphans' lives

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American baseball enthusiast brings the joy of home runs and throwing strikes to orphans in his native Ukraine



American Vasyl Tarasko, a native of Ukraine, wanted to combine his love of baseball and desire to help the nation's orphans.

Kyiv street kids are a common sight. They gather empty bottles to earn some money to fuel their early smoking and alcohol habits and see little hope for change.

"I want to have some hobbies, but I couldn't at my orphanage because we don't even have sports equipment, not to mention visiting a theater. I started to return empty bottles for money and then spent it to buy some cigarettes and marijuana my friends managed to get," said 10-year-old Oleksandr Chernov, a Kyiv orphan.

There is one man who tries to give kids like Oleksandr an alternative. Vasyl Tarasko, a New Yorker of Ukrainian origin, has become the unofficial ambassador of Little League Baseball in Ukrainian orphanages (<http://www.ukrainebaseball.org/orphanages.html>) since 2006. A baseball coach and player, he initially hoped the sport would be taken up by regular kids. But it never happened because the Ukrainian baseball system is designed for elite athletes.

"The Little League philosophy is just the opposite. It allows each child to participate no matter whether they have parents or not or what their level of skill is. This idea was not taking hold in Ukraine," Tarasko said.

But one day he had an insight. "One of my friends said there are hundreds of orphanages in Ukraine where children do not know what to do except acquire bad habits. I realized exactly where the children [who need baseball] were in Ukraine," Tarasko said.

He began to identify orphanages that had at least 50 children aged 9 to 12, calling the directors, visiting them to see whether there was any interest in adding baseball to their sports program.

Today there are four Ukrainian orphanages that take part in the Ukrainian Little League, out of 14 that also received baseball equipment from Tarasko. For the kids, the game makes a real difference.

"Baseball gave me opportunities unlike anything before," said Valeriy Tokarskiy, a 12-year old orphan from Kreminets orphanage in Ternopil's oblast. "The game helped me and my friends to feel like a real team: each person brings something and we work together as a team."

This year Tokarskiy's team lost 12-8 to Lytuhane from Luhansk oblast in the world's first-ever World Little League Baseball Orphanage Championship that was started by Tarasko. It was held on Sept. 26 – 28 in Pushcha Ozerna, 20 kilometers outside Kyiv.

Despite the fact that his team lost, Tokarskiy is not sad. "The value of participating in such competition is immeasurable. This is the first time I ever traveled outside my orphanage. Vasyl [Tarasko] showed us Kyiv, he bought us all tickets to visit the circus. This was all part of the experience of my first baseball game! We lost, but I don't care, our coach was taking photos all the time like we were champions!" Tokarskiy said.

There is a strict rule for participating in the baseball championship: give up your bad habits. An 11-year-old boy from Kreminets orphanage was suspended from the game because he swore at his team members when they started to lose.

"I will have a big talk with you this evening," threatened Oleksandr Korchakovskiy, his physical education teacher in Kreminets orphanage.

But it's not just the kids who benefit from Tarasko's charitable and passionate promotion of baseball. Teachers said they are grateful as well.

"I was an ordinary physical education teacher in a Kreminets orphanage. No one cared. When Vasyl came I felt support for me and my kids...I noticed them changing, passionately playing baseball better and better at each lesson," Korchakovskiy said.

Tarasko comes to Ukraine every half a year or so, bringing new equipment donated by the Little Leagues in the United States and organizing meetings for coaches, explaining the rules of the game and techniques. He will once again come in April to train new and inexperienced baseball coaches.

For Tarasko, it's also a dream come true. Ever since he emigrated with his parents at the age of five, he dreamt of returning to Ukraine. "My wife is also from Ukraine and she told me to go and my father said he would be proud if I come back to Ukraine for something good," he said.

