



Baseball And Uganda — Two Words That Don't Usually Go Together

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They are the champions of Africa (and Europe, too): Uganda's 2015 team will take on the best of the planet in the Little League Baseball World Series that starts Thursday in Williamsport, Pa.
Courtesy of Uganda Little League

It was a touching story three years ago when a team of Ugandan boys became the first African team to compete in the [Little League Baseball World Series](#), held each August in Williamsport, Pa. The wide-eyed 11- and 12-year-olds charmed the crowds. Their story was told in a poignant documentary, [Opposite Field](#), that aired on ABC. But they bowed out after going 1-2 in the series itself, looking a bit overwhelmed.

Tune in to *Morning Edition* this Friday for a report on Uganda's team — and check out Goats and Soda for photos of the East African baseballers.

YouTube

"They'd never seen a curveball," says the current Ugandan coach, Bernard Adei.

Uganda is back this year, but don't cue the violins. "Oh yeah, they can hit curveballs — and they can throw them, too," says Richard Stanley, the team's New York-based benefactor. "These kids can play."

Oh, can they ever. A month ago, the Ugandan nine torched five European teams. The only Africans at the regional tournament, the Ugandans "mercy ruled" every opponent but one. That means they stomped the competition so soundly that games were stopped out of, well, mercy. Uganda won with scores ranging from 21-1 to 4-0, winning the championship against Spain 16-0.

Uganda and baseball: The combination may surprise fans in the U.S. But get used to it. While the boys were readying for their series this week, a girls' team from Uganda barely missed making the final four at the [Little League Softball World Series](#) in Portland, Ore.

It's no fluke. Stanley says Uganda is a natural fit for competitive sports. While the nation of 38 million is economically struggling, its capital, Kampala — which sits nearly a mile high in altitude — has temperatures that rarely drop below 60 degrees Fahrenheit or go above the 80s. "The kids can play baseball all year round," Stanley says.

And they do. Part of his design is a boarding school for around 130 boys and girls, all of whom get a free ride from Stanley. The budding baseballers among them practice daily after studies. In addition, thousands of other Ugandan kids play in the country's various leagues.

To hear the 72-year-old Stanley tell it, Uganda sports just needed a push. They got it in 2002 from the fast-talking New Yorker. Stanley has since assembled the school, baseball and softball leagues — as well as a health clinic — by working with Ugandan officials and educators. Donations have come from Little League International and Major League Baseball as well as Japan and elsewhere.

And from Stanley's savings. A chemical engineer by trade, Stanley says he did well with investments and lives modestly on Staten Island. "I don't drive big, fancy cars, and I rarely eat out," he says. "This is something I'm able to do."

He came to Uganda through charity work, which he started after retiring early from Procter & Gamble around 1990. By 2002, he'd made his way to Uganda, which thoroughly charmed him, and was asked to help with sports.

His Ugandan hosts apparently knew that was his weakness. A longtime referee and umpire for high school and college sports, Stanley also was part owner of a minor league baseball team.

The Staten Islander quickly wangled equipment donations from U.S. leagues and paid to ship them to Uganda, where leagues got underway by 2004. As the teams improved, he financed trips to international tournaments, culminating in the World Series appearance in 2012.

Not to say anything is easy in Uganda. Most of the players come from poor backgrounds and from single-parent families, if any parents survive at all. Some early equipment donations were grabbed by corrupt officials. Even now, there aren't enough fields and equipment — players share gloves, sometimes just one for every three or four kids.

But it isn't lack of mitts that's kept Uganda from the World Series since 2012. For several years, the team struck out on getting to international tournaments because of blocked visas or rules that didn't allow for boarding school residents to participate.

The Little League organization changed its rules — and the team this year again conquered the visa red tape. Parents or guardians had to sign documents, which meant 10-hour bus rides home for some kids. The regional tournament, meanwhile, was in Poland, which has no Ugandan embassy, so kids took other buses to neighboring Kenya for visas.

"Kids have to miss days of school just to get their visas," says Adei.

Despite his confidence in this year's team, Stanley's been around baseball long enough to know anything can happen in a short baseball series. Uganda opens play Thursday against the Dominican Republic, a game with added meaning for Stanley, who notes how Dominican ballplayers are scouted and signed at a young age by major league teams.

"I think Uganda can be the next Dominican Republic," he says.