

Connor, Justice, Austin, Brenden, Cliff, Kyle
and Michael
Photography by Lisa Mangos



Spring Fever

Written by Melinda McBride

Little League Baseball Breaks Out Across Sugar Land

Sugar Land fathers who played Little League in their youth are managing their sons' teams and reliving the pure joy of being on a baseball diamond.

Sugar Land Loves Baseball

Craig Popp and David Ikeler are Sugar Land fathers, friends, and coaches. Despite the demands of coaching a Rookie team for First Colony Little League, the two take advantage of any fair-weather day to spend even more time practicing with their sons. David's son, Colton, is entering his third season of Little League baseball. The dark-haired second baseman has his future planned, "My favorite player is Roger Clements so I want to grow up and be a pitcher," Colton said on the way to the practice field.

Kelsie, Blake, Elvin, Ryan, Christopher, Christian, Jonathan and Colton



Jonathan Popp, Colton's friend and teammate, idolizes Craig Biggio and is set on a similar path to be a baseball player. With three year's experience to draw upon, this diminutive blonde athlete already has advice for younger players entering the league. "For T-ball players, they really need to learn to catch the ball because sometimes they can't catch pop flies." And while the league's youngest players may not catch all the pop flies that come their way, they definitely catch a distinctive baseball bug.

John-Michael Coffman, an avid baseball player, is an eight-year-old who looks forward to the draft each year. "Every year, I wonder if I'm going to mess up so I try my best," John-Michael said. The competitive slugger is in the minors this year where children learn to hit from a pitching machine. One of only a handful of children to start playing at age four because of league age rules, John-Michael easily remembers his inside-the-park home run when he was just seven years old.

Michael and Brenden are brothers who love baseball



"I hit an RBI to win a game that got us into the playoffs. We won the championship and everyone cheered and jumped on each other."

His mom, Dawn, believes her son's Little League experiences are helping her son succeed on the field and in life. "The coaches appreciate kids who listen and want to learn so John-Michael is learning valuable lessons on the field that he uses every day of his life."

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Supporting Cast Members

The local Little Leagues are fortunate to have plenty of Sugar Land parents to call upon to help coach and manage the teams. David Ikeler grew up playing Little League in Stafford. "First of all, in order for the kids to have fun, parents need to be involved," David said. "My advice to parents is not to be too critical -- that's one of the biggest faults. Don't push so hard that they get pushed out of the sport."

Craig Popp has been managing for three years and agrees that positive reinforcement is the key. "I think they're learning teamwork because they really have to work together. They are building friendships working toward a common goal and at the same time learning many fundamental skills both about the sport and about life. These kids listen and they grow. Before they could not catch a ball, now they're doing it consistently. They're out there to have fun. I'm sure some of the kids dream of being the next Craig Biggio ... if they're inspired to do that but the main thing is to have fun."



Sugar Land leagues have both fall seasons, with the fall being more for and the spring being more competitive. Players, both male and female, don't think about the competitive nature of more about the fringe benefits. "For me, difference in the seasons but I think that fall a lot of new kids come," said fifth-grader Justice Brown. "Spring ball is when more experienced players play. I love baseball as a sport and just play because it's fun to me." Justice has been playing three years and this year will play for Sugar Land Little League on the major division Astros.

and spring training. The seem to the sport but there's really no ball is a time when



SUGAR LAND AREA LITTLE LEAGUES

Websites for More Information

SUGAR LAND AREA LITTLE LEAGUE
slll.org
lamarlittleleague.com

FIRST COLONY LITTLE LEAGUE
fclll.org

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Elvin, Jonathan, Blake, Christian, Christopher



“For every kid who feels happy -- that’s a win.”

It’s All About Friends

Ten-year old twins Michael and Brenden Nagel have made it to the championship but the times they remember are those special moments with a coach, a friend, or a teammate. “My favorite memory is when I hit a home run over the fence and the other team’s coach said that if anyone had to hit a home run off his team, he was glad it was me. It made me feel good so I will always remember that coach, Coach Brian.” Brenden, a fifth-grader going on his sixth season of little league, is now in the major division of Sugar Land Little League. “My baseball friends really know me because I’m always on the fields having fun with them and talking about sports and fifth-grade stuff,” he said.

His brother Michael appreciates the coaching and many times he’s had to really put effort into learning the game. “It’s just one experience after another and it never ends -- that’s why it’s so fun and my friends agree that playing baseball is our life and we want to grow up to be baseball players.” But even if that doesn’t happen, Michael’s happy that the friends he made playing baseball will still be there.

Blake eyes the pop fly



Austin slides to the bag



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"I'll never forget when I robbed the other team of a home run ... I ran back to the fence, leaned over with my glove and snagged the ball but slammed my shoulder. It was worth it because my friends were so nice and happy about it."

The Bonding Experience

Colton's mom Melanie agrees that there is something about the sport that lends itself to kids, parents and teammates just getting along. "It's a wonderful bonding experience in a great, well-rounded sport. Each child can show talent without needing to be a superstar."

Maybe seven-year-old Jonathan summed it up best, "It just makes me feel happy to have a good hit."



The rally cheer

For his father and manager Craig, his son's enthusiasm encapsulates the sport. "For every kid who feels happy -- that's a win." **SLM**

MELINDA MCBRIDE is a Sugar Land area mom and freelance writer. Her sons Michael and Brendan spend many hours a week at the baseball field.



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