



Historically Speaking

With Eastchester Historian
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THE TRIUMPHANT BIRTH OF LITTLE LEAGUE

1954-1956

The ideas of the Eastchester Little League germinated in the basement of Frank Bianco's home in 1953. A group of likeminded friends, all lovers of sports and most to them veterans known as the Eastchester Men's Social Club, wanted to see all young boys play baseball.

The first problem was money and Frank Bianco was the answer. He sent out thousands of letters to the residents of Eastchester and Tuckahoe. He went further and formed a fundraising group of mothers to canvass the local stores in the area.

By 1954 there was enough money to start a four-team league. That spring, 300 boys showed up for a league tryout. Because of the huge turnout, a second league had to be formed. But there was no money.

Again Frank Bianco came to the rescue. He organized groups of Little Leaguers dressed in their uniforms with coffee cans with sealed lids and gave each group different streets to canvass. They went door-to-door asking for donations to help the Little League. With all their efforts, they managed to raise enough monies for the new teams. Phil White, Frank's brother, assisted in the finances and directed people to do what needed to be done.

The Eastchester Little League began in the spring of 1954. There were eight teams with 15 boys on a team: Yankees, Giants, Red Sox, and the Tigers in the American League and four other teams in the National League. Games were played where the former old Wilmot School on White Plains Road was located, across the street from the Lord and Taylor shopping center and south of Trader Joe's today. Over the next three years the Eastchester Little League would experience its greatest triumph.

The Triumph

On Aug. 12, 1956 an article in *The New York Times* read, "Five thousand persons lined the streets of Eastchester this afternoon to cheer the Eastchester American League All-Stars. They will play in the Little League World Series at Williamsport, Pa. beginning Aug. 20." Only three years before there was no organized baseball for boys in the town. So much success so fast!

The qualifying game was played on Aug. 11 at Utica, N.Y. with the Eastchester team winning 3-2.

The New York Times article read, "Russ Smith, a right-handed pitcher...held Rome hitless for five innings...Pete Kuczma handed his catcher's mitt to Russ in the sixth and final inning and finished the game on the mound, Ron Oddo ran for hard-hitting Nick Boscia and scored the winning run on Kuczma's single, and for Jimmy Ciarlo, Eastchester's



In the playoff game Eastchester lost, one bad call by the umpire was never forgotten. The team was down 3-2 with one out and Russell Smith stole home. Though the catcher never tagged him, the umpire wrongly called him out saying it was a force play.

big stick who hit a home run in the third inning."

The exploits of Jimmy Ciarlo's performance drew the attention of one of the most famous baseball players of all time, Jackie Robinson. Jimmy had 11 hits in eight playoff games: seven of the hits were homers. Jimmy was walked with the bases loaded in 1956 Little League World Series. He was deliberately walked after hitting two home runs the first two times at bat. In 1957 Jackie Robinson was interviewed on television and he was asked if any major league ballplayer had ever been intentionally walked with the bases loaded. Jackie stated that to his knowledge this had never happened in the major leagues but it did happen to a Little Leaguer from Eastchester in the World Series.

The Eastchester team might have gone all the way except for one unfortunate call. In the last inning Eastchester was behind 3-2 with one out. Russ Smith stole home but the umpire called him out without a tag ever being applied. The explanation of the umpire was that there was no need for a tag because it was a force play, a gross misinterpretation of the rules.

The score remained at 3-2 and now there were two outs. The third out sent the would-be champs back home. The correct call would have seen a tied score with only one out.

But the memories and the honors for the Eastchester team were not over. On Sept. 7, 1956 in a special ceremony at Yankee Stadium the entire Little League team including Head Coach Frank Bianci, Mike Hughes and John and Roy Cusick were presented with silver medals donated by *The Daily News*, Mickey Mantle and manager Casey Stengel.

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