

White Sox host Double Duty Classic

Game celebrates history of Negro Leagues in Chicago

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By Scott Merkin / MLB.com

07/01/10 7:03 PM ET

CHICAGO -- The theme of Wednesday's third-annual Double Duty Classic at U.S. Cellular Field certainly centered on baseball tradition, celebrating the history of the Negro Leagues in Chicago, with players from the Negro Leagues on hand.

But White Sox general manager Ken Williams took the time to drive home important points beyond the game to the elite young players taking part in Wednesday's competition. These words of wisdom from Williams came during a special private forum at the U.S. Cellular Conference and Learning Center prior to the game.

"Well, it's an opportunity to influence some young athletes, but more importantly, it's an opportunity to influence some young men," said Williams after delivering his inspiring words from the panel including journalist Scoop Jackson and Negro Leagues Baseball Museum President Greg Baker.

"It's about getting not just a message of the sporting life in front of them, but it's a message of life and responsibilities that they have, that they hold the opportunities to develop their character and their minds as vigorously as their bodies.

"Sports are something you do, and along the way, you gain teamwork abilities, the confidence in yourself and all of that," Williams said. "It's not an end all. It's a beginning to what real life is about. That's more my message than anything."

Serving as one of the presiding forces over two American League Central titles and the organization's lone World Series title in 2005, Williams certainly was qualified to also provide baseball advice. He talked about putting extra effort into all areas of their game, informing the players how if they aren't going that extra mile, they could be sure some other player at their same level was doing just that.

Williams wants to see an increase in African-Americans playing baseball at the Major League Baseball level and throughout the lower levels leading to the Majors. It's a process the White Sox are trying to facilitate through their Amateur City Elite team, giving extra exposure to high school players from Chicago's inner-city.

Then again, baseball certainly wasn't Williams' lone focus.

"Yes, I hope it turns the corner, but I hope it turns the corner at the same rate the incarceration rate is turning the corner in a downward spiral," Williams said. "As well as the number of college graduates and attendees are increasing in the African-American community, therefore producing more businessmen, lawyers and everything else.

"You have the dream, and you don't want to take anyone's dream away, but the fact of the matter is the odds are against you. If you work hard and have the talent, you've got a chance.

"My message to them is even if you do make it, there is still an ending to that athletic career. Right from the beginning, develop your stuff along the lines of being mentally prepared for the rest of life as you were physically prepared for your athletic endeavors. Please, please put an equal amount of time into developing your mind, your vocabulary, your soul and your character."

Ronzelle Fort was one of those players taking Williams' message to heart on Wednesday. The 18-year-old from Harlan High School, who was part of the aforementioned White Sox ACE high school travel team, was selected by the White Sox late in the 2010 First-Year Player Draft.

This 6-foot-7 pitcher/first baseman, who grew up minutes away from U.S. Cellular, decided to put his big league dream on hold and opted to honor his collegiate commitment to Texas Southern. Fort was the first member of his family to graduate high school, bringing tears to his mother's eyes, according to Fort, and wants to be the first one from his family to graduate college.



GM Ken Williams (right) spoke in a private forum before the game. (Ron Vesely/White Sox)

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"That was the proudest moment I ever had in my life," said Fort of being drafted by the White Sox. "I felt like I needed to get better as far as pitching, and I always wanted my college degree. That's the main thing to do in today's economy, go to school and get an education."

"Everyone here wants to be a pro athlete," said Sean Gibson, the great grandson of Negro Leagues legend Josh Gibson and president of the Josh Gibson Foundation, who also took part in this event. "Even if you make it, you are going to retire one day. You have to have a life after baseball. I like what Kenny said about giving 100 percent no matter what you do. Put 100 percent into life and get fulfilled joyfulness of being successful no matter what it is."

Wednesday's contest, honoring the 77th anniversary of the Negro Leagues East-West All-Star Game played at Old Comiskey Park, ended in a 2-2 deadlock, with Quintin Richardson from Simeon High School in Chicago earning Most Valuable Player honors. The players also gained valuable pregame information from individuals in lofty positions where they would like to someday arrive as adults.

"If you have failure along the way, get over it fast," Williams said. "Get through it and go on to the next step. I don't want to hear excuses. When you make up your mind to do something, you just keep moving forward."

"Just to have this Classic is an honor," Gibson said. "It's an honor for young adults to carry that tradition on. We preach there is history to be kept alive for the younger generation."

***Scott Merkin** is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.*

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