

YOUTH BASEBALL ALLIANCE DREAM BECOMES REALITY

By Allan Kreda

Eight youth baseball associations had a dream -- a vision of establishing a true national championship tournament for young players across America – and Eddie Einhorn came through.

Employing persuasion, negotiation and perhaps perspiration, that vision been realized as the eight groups will send teams to a tournament August 21-24 in Memphis as part of the new Major Youth Baseball Alliance LLC. Executives from each organization gathered to promote the alliance in New York on June 3 and 4. The inaugural National Youth Baseball Championships will feature 10-under and 12-under divisions and may include as many as eight age groups in the future.

The alliance includes Babe Ruth Baseball; Pony Baseball; Dixie Baseball; the American Amateur Baseball Congress; the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States; Super Series Baseball of America; the National Amateur Baseball Federation and the United States Specialty Sports Association.

“I’m doing this because it’s a passion, and it’s been a long time in coming,” said Mr. Einhorn, co-owner of the Chicago White Sox since 1981. “We all have one thought in mind – helping kids and celebrating youth baseball. I am very excited.”

Hall of Famer Frank Robinson, now a Major League Baseball executive, attended one of the Manhattan events and expressed gratitude and admiration for the new youth baseball collaboration.

“Organizations like this are so important,” said Mr. Robinson, who played youth baseball in Oakland, California, before hitting 586 home runs in 21 major-league seasons and winning the Most Valuable Player award in both leagues. “The only way to save kids is through sports. The children of our country need your help.”

The alliance hasn’t yet established agreements with television outlets or corporate sponsors but Mr. Einhorn is confident they will emerge. The plan this year is to stream tournament games from the Gameday youth baseball complex in Memphis on Web sites of the eight baseball organizations.

“This will be ongoing, we’re just starting out this year,” Mr. Einhorn said. “This is so significant because this is the first gathering of all eight groups. They have never been together, until now. There’s no limit to what we can accomplish together.”

For youth baseball executives, the alliance is cause for celebration.

“It’s awesome to have more kids play more baseball,” said Don DeDonatis, chairman and CEO of the United States Specialty Sports Association. “It’s all for the kids, that’s what is most important. It will be amazing in Memphis.”

Mr. Einhorn, who has experience negotiating agreements between Major League Baseball and major networks, plans to use that acumen in navigating the new media world to benefit his youth baseball creation.

“We’re talking network, cable and Internet. This is the biggest content package that I know,” Mr. Einhorn said. “There’s none bigger, so I am sure this alliance will grow and grow.”

Young players from Memphis, Philadelphia and New York joined festivities at Gallagher’s Steak House in Manhattan, where they had the chance to rub shoulders with Toronto Blue Jays pitchers Roy Halladay and Shaun Marcum. The hurlers had time before facing the New York Yankees at Yankee Stadium that evening.

“I’m thrilled to be here. It means everything to me to give time to kids,” said Mr. Halladay, winner of the 2003 American League Cy Young Award, who stayed an extra 15 minutes to sign autographs for the youngsters, all of whom were in full uniform. “I wish everyone luck with this great effort. It’s very important.”

Alex Martinez, president of Inwood Manhattan Baseball, Inc., whose upper Manhattan baseball diamonds are less than five miles from Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, said a national tournament is especially meaningful for his players, many from immigrant families.

“This is tremendous for these kids, a chance to play for a national title every year,” said Mr. Martinez, whose Inwood Manhattan Eagles play in the Cal Ripken Division of Babe Ruth League. “Now they will have an extra special goal every season, which should make them work even harder to excel.”

The event’s significance was particularly poignant for Gino Bova, a coach for Our Lady of Grace in Brooklyn, New York, who attended with his 10-year-old son Gino Jr.

“I know firsthand what it means to meet your idol,” Mr. Bova said after he and his son posed for a team picture with Halladay and Marcum. “I met (Yankee catcher and captain) Thurman Munson in 1973 when he visited our school in Brooklyn. I was eight years old, and the feeling that we mattered that much to him stays with me to this day.”

Mr. Einhorn beamed as he watched the proceedings, thrilled to be witnessing the dream transforming from concept to reality.

“This isn’t about me, it’s about kids on 600,000 teams across America playing baseball and having fun,” Mr. Einhorn said. “This

gives every kid a chance to be a national champion every year.”