

Neighborhood Sports Chicago

Basketball, sure, but rowing and archery too

By Gordon Walek, Carl Vogel and Amadi-Jordan Walker on Wednesday, April 8, 2009

Daryl Bell, the Teamwork Englewood organizer who's supervising Spring Into Sports competition at Englewood High School, is a man with a mission – to engage young people in constructive activity during their idle Spring Break, to open windows of opportunity for them, and to help them have a little fun. And in a neighborhood that's seen its share of hard times, he also wants to keep them alive.



Daryl Bell, left, brings kids to the gym to add new skills and stay busy.

To that last point, he saw the basketball tourney as a way to recruit those who may be prone to making trouble during the week off. He asked rival gang leaders to referee, noting that “there will be no killings today because the gang leaders are in here.” And referee they did.

Indeed, several hundred people each day have turned out at Englewood and the three other SIS sites to participate in, coach, referee or simply observe a bunch of Chicago school kids playing their hearts out.

One of the coaches is Walter Roger Brown, a former Chicago Bull and alumni of Englewood High School who towers over everyone in the gym. As a former neighborhood resident, he enjoys giving back to the community and was excited about the potential of Spring Into Sports. “I think it's positive because it gives kids something to do during clean up week [spring break]”.

Getting into other sports

While basketball was shaping up as the marquee sport at most venues, it was by no means the only game in town. One purpose of SIS is to introduce kids to sports they might not be familiar with. Competitive table tennis, for example. [And archery \(see slideshow\)](#). And crew, or rowing. Given that Englewood, Crane, Orr and Little Village Lawndale high schools are landlocked, you'd think anything involving a boat would be a stretch. But that didn't stop Montana Butsch, executive director of the Chicago Training Center (CTC), from taking his rowing act to Englewood on Monday. CTC's focus is to provide disadvantaged Chicago youth with community-rowing opportunities to further their athletic development and personal growth.

Butsch sidestepped the water problem by hauling a couple of stationary rowing machines onto Englewood

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High's gym floor and projecting video of actual rowing competitions on a big screen. He then addressed a bleacher audience of about 100 kids with an endearing tough-love speech about the physical and emotional benefits of rowing.



Students worked the rowing machine until their backs and arms were sore.

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“I understand this sport is probably completely foreign to you,” he said. “I started when I was 14 because I was no good at football and basketball. This is a sport you can do with no background.”

Meanwhile, a couple of his assistants began working out on the machines, quickly breaking a sweat. The sport, said Butsch, provides a real workout – one that will serve you well if you’re involved in other sports. But it’s more than that. Colleges are looking for rowing crews and proficiency at the sport could grease the skids through the admissions office. And then there’s the matter of teamwork – the discipline to work in lockstep with other rowers.

“If there’s one bad person on the boat, it’s really going to suck,” he said. The kids heard him, loud and clear, then proceeded to the machines.

“It was fun,” said Quanteonna Howard, 13, a student at Walter Reed Elementary School at 63rd and Stewart. “But then it made my back hurt.” No pain, no gain.

Wrap-around services

At Crane High School, similar activities were underway. Near the registration table, two volunteers who usually work on outreach around the Chicago Housing Authority’s Henry Horner Homes were distributing flyers about summer jobs for teens, summer baseball leagues, fitness classes, mural painting and other activities. There were flyers about job training for adults, too, which were added after some adults made inquiries.

“The idea is to provide wrap-around social services,” says Oji Eggleston, of the Near West Side Community Development Corporation, which organized the activities at Crane. “We’ve got the kids here, and we want to be able to use this event to let them know about other opportunities.”

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And at Little Village Lawndale High School, where a basketball team of girls had just narrowly lost to an all-boy team (“The girls should have won that game,” said their coach, Jamie Finley), Christina Bronsing, of Enlace Chicago, was busy enlisting athletes into Enlace’s summer basketball programs, including B-Ball on the Block, where games are organized at neighborhood hot spots in Little Village and North Lawndale. The purpose is part crime prevention, part community organizing, part health screening, part fun.

“We’re looking for consistent girls’ teams for B-Ball on the Block,” she told Finley, who coaches girls’ basketball year-round. He was interested. Bronsing noted that once they enlist kids into the b-ball program, they can use offer health screenings and other services.

Spring Into Sports lasts only a week, but the event provides opportunities for relationships that will endure much longer. News of new programming will be posted here at www.neighborhoodsportschicago.org.



Rowing demands strength and teamwork, said Montana Butsch of Chicago Training Center (right).

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