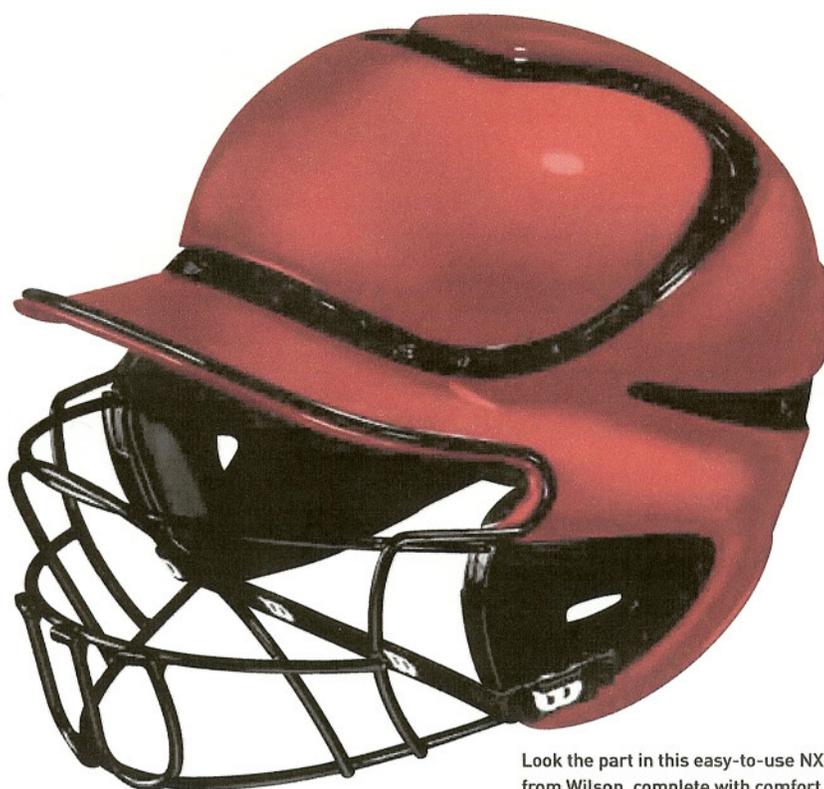
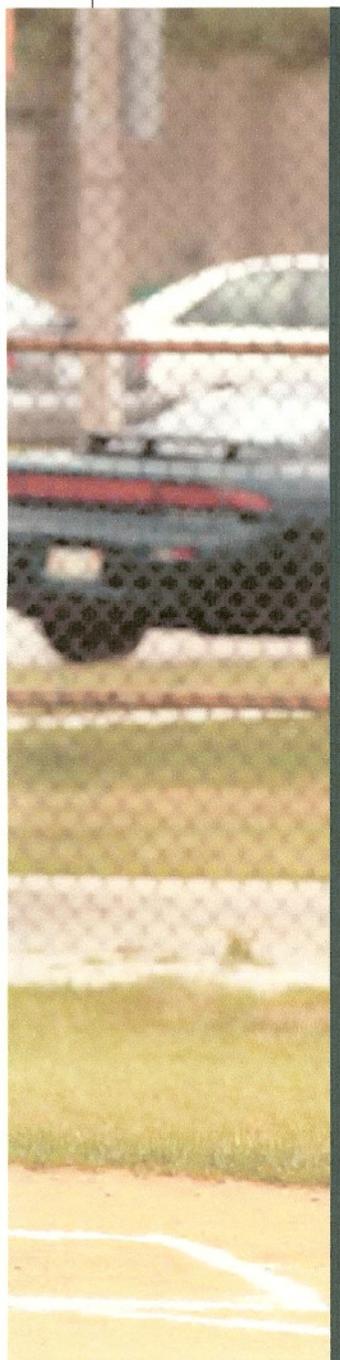


Baseball for all



Baseball is played at all levels.

- Text by Jennifer Lyng
- Photos by Wilson



Look the part in this easy-to-use NXTGEN helmet from Wilson, complete with comfort foam padding made from the latest breathable materials.

It's a ground ball to the shortstop, deftly swept up, tossed to second for one out, then fired to first for the double play. The players head back to the dugout, eager for their turn at bat.

These aren't professional players; they play for the love of the game and the camaraderie of their team mates. This attraction to baseball is usually apparent at a young age, with 2.7 million children playing Little League baseball and more than another million playing in other organized leagues in the United States alone. In addition to playing the game, many are fans of major league baseball, the local minor league team or an area college team. Some of these youngsters have aspirations of being one of those players, or at least trying to play like them.

The T-ball helps children to practice hitting

One of the trends affecting baseball today is that the players are getting younger. With the introduction of T-ball, where the children hit the ball off of a tee, the basics of the game are introduced at the age of 4 or 5. Next comes a few years of pitching by the coaches, then the players are allowed to pitch to each other. This is when the cream starts to rise to the top.

Another trend is that the talented, or those 'with potential,' are being nurtured more intensely, and at a younger age, than ever. While most programs are open to players of all talent levels, elite travel squads are avail-

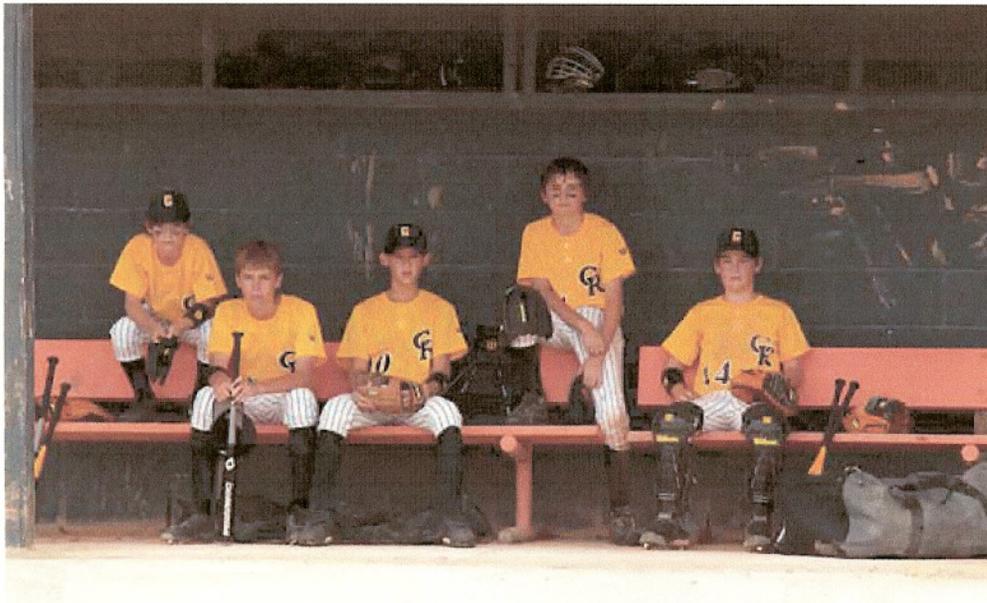
able for children as young as 8 and 9 years old. These teams hold try-outs and the game gets taken to a different level. These players often play year-round baseball, some with personal coaches, with their eyes on coveted spots on their high school team. (Yes, indoor facilities have been built to take weather out of the equation.) The hope is to get noticed by either college or pro scouts, which could lead to a lucrative college scholarship and/or an invitation to try out for a professional squad.

Of course, most of the children playing youth baseball will not make the pros or get a college scholarship; most won't even make their high school team. These players are often content to simply enjoy the game of baseball while learning some valuable life-long skills, such as teamwork, sportsmanship and how to handle individual pressure. They also make new friends along the way.

Improved helmets

An emphasis on safety is yet another rising trend. With increased bat speed and corresponding velocity of the ball off the bat, the safety of the players has received added attention. Batting helmets are made of stronger materials, have better fitting designs and many now include air vents for added comfort. Face shields are now also an option.

Wilson has had a major influence in this trend. Only in the batting helmet market since 2000, Wilson has alrea-



Junior players look to top athletes for role models.

dy garnered a 30% share. Jim Hackett, Wilson's General Manager for Baseball and Softball, says that "not only has Wilson made helmets that are more protective, but we've been able to raise the expected price point of helmets by providing increased quality, comfort and that all-important 'coolness' factor."

Since many of the prime players are playing year-round or on multiple teams, the coaches are now being very careful not to "over use" the young arms. Pitchers are throwing faster fastballs and learning to throw breaking pitches that years ago were not taught until high school. Too much, too soon, can lead to an early end to an aspiring pitching career. Pitch counts, or the number of pitches a player can throw before being replaced,

are even a relatively new phenomenon in the major leagues, but are now being instituted for some Little Leagues.

Corresponding with the younger age of player development is the demand for top quality equipment at an ever earlier age. Jim Urich, a coach of his son's team in the Chicago suburbs, says that he "is impressed with the quality of the baseball gloves today at all price points. There is a well-made glove for every level of play."

Wilson, the Official Ball Glove of Major League Baseball, makes top-quality gloves for about a third of the pros. Hackett boasts that "Wilson is the only company that offers a pro quality glove to consumers in the exact specs that the pros use." Taking their popular A2000 model's looks

and patterns down throughout the line, Wilson has been able to create a marketable point of difference down to \$69.

Here come the seniors

Regarding the importance of equipment, Bill Foss became a catcher at 9 years old when he was given Wilson catcher's gear as a gift. He went on to play scholarship ball in college and play for the Chicago Cubs in the minor leagues. Now a financial planner, Foss continues to play organized ball, but now he's in the '48 & over' division.

This is yet another growing trend in baseball. The Mens Senior and Adult Baseball Leagues are growing, with more than 45,000 members currently playing on 3,200 teams. These leagues provide the opportunity for players 18 & over, 28 & over, and so on to play competitive baseball on a regular basis. Similar to the younger leagues, players come from every talent level. There are some serious athletes (some former collegiate and minor league players) playing alongside guys who just love the game and want some exercise. There are even players who never made their high-school team but now have a chance to put on a uniform and get an at-bat or two.

What brings them together is their often life-long love of baseball. Foss says that his team's roster includes a surgeon and an attorney, as well as a truck driver and warehouse worker. "Baseball transcends our differences," he claims. "The bench is diverse in race, income and interests, but is full of mutual respect and esprit de corps."

One final trend is the importance of snacks for the athletes after the final out is made. For some players, post-game treats are more of a motivation than the game itself. This time-honored and seemingly growing tradition applies to all levels of baseball, whether it is cupcakes and juice boxes for the kids, pizza for the teens or post-game beers for the adults. In the end, baseball's a game for all. ■



The Wilson A2K DW5 glove.