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Ex-pros help kids take game to Next Level

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Many purists will tell you that baseball is a game loved by many but understood by few. The reason for this, purists would say, is that the more you play, the more you learn the nuances of the game.

For kids trying to learn the game early in life, the presence of those learned few who have played professional baseball becomes more and more crucial in correcting habits and developing good fundamentals that will serve them throughout their playing careers.

Such knowledge was on display Aug. 15-19 at St. Mary's College as Next Level Baseball Camps held its annual week-long camp for youth baseball players. The campers benefited from three available fields at St. Mary's and more than 60 campers attended, the largest turnout in the three-year history of the camp.

Next Level Baseball Camps is the brainchild of former St. Mary's College catcher Brian Vesce. Vesce, along with co-founder Mike Byers, started the camp in 2002 as a way to continue to be involved with the game after their playing careers had ended.

"We decided to run a camp one summer so we called the school since no one uses the field in the summer," Vesce explained. "We had a great turnout and we realized that this is a lot of fun. We realized that this is the best place to work, and the field is basically my office now."

Once the camp got started, word spread throughout the community. Enrollment has gone up every year it's been offered, and while Vesce certainly has gone the extra mile to market the camps, the main attraction continues to be the level of instruction he has assembled to run the camp.

"It's an unbelievable amount of talent we have out here. All these guys come back to give back to the community," Vesce said. "The synergies between the coaches and the kids are great because they've all come up through the same leagues and had the same experiences."

This year's camp was certainly not lacking qualified instructors. Peter Dunkle, former Colorado Rockies prospect and teammate of Vesce's at Monte Vista High School, teamed with University of San Francisco pitching coach Greg Moore to teach pitching.

Clint Hoover, former Houston Astros minor leaguer, Campolindo High grad and Cal utility player, led a group of current St. Mary's and USF players and graduates to instruct the hitters.

"Most of the guys here have done camps before," Hoover said. "We have a good group of people to help out, and the ratio of kids really helps out, especially with the younger guys."

When not playing actual game situations, the drills the kids participate in reflect the experience the coaches bring to the table.

The campers were broken into three groups, and each group had instruction that was tailored to its age level and skill development, a part of the camp that Dunkle found helpful in instructing his young pitchers.

"For the young kids, you're just trying to get them a feel for baseball as a whole. For the middle-age kids, you're trying to get them a little more comfortable on the mound and try to teach them to throw a changeup. For the older kids, you're trying to refine what they've learned in the past. You want them to be more of a finished product," Dunkle noted.

Despite all the help Vesce receives, however, it was clear to all the campers and parents that he is the force that drives Next Level Baseball. Whether it was knowing each participant's name or leading the campers through sprints after lunch, Vesce made a point to reach out to every player at the camp.

"Brian took over by himself this year and put it all on his shoulders," Dunkle said. "He's done a great job of getting involved with the community and creating a relationship with all the Little Leagues. This was a much smaller camp last year and in the years to come I'm sure it's going to continue to grow."

Next Level Baseball Camps offers outreach to individual leagues in addition to their annual camps. For more information on the camps and individual league instruction, visit www.NextLevelBaseballCamps.com.