

After American Football and Basketball, Major League Baseball Is Trying to Gain a Foothold in Germany

Pitching the Perfect Marketing Strategy

By Dirk Schmidtke

BERLIN. Jim Small looked like a man on a mission, which indeed he was. En route from London via Manchester and Milan, baseball's traveling salesman stopped over in Berlin and visited three schools before flying on to Paris. Small's lightning visit went as unnoticed as it was unspectacular. Yet, he was in Berlin on behalf of Major League Baseball, and his plans were highly ambitious.

"Our aim," said MLB's vice-president for market development, "is to make baseball as successful a sport in Germany one day as soccer is today."

A tall order. But Small sounded nothing if not confident in his role as a missionary for what, in Germany, is a marginal sport. "Take someone from Mars, show him a game of soccer and try to explain to him that he is not to use his hands and he must kick the ball into the net. He will understand nothing. That's why we have to educate people," he said.

Following in the footsteps of football's NFL and basketball's NBA, baseball is the third of North America's big leagues to head for Europe. But baseball managers have realized that they will need to adopt an approach that is different from the ones used by their competitors. They can neither aim to set up baseball as a finished-product league similarly spectacular as the NFL in Europe, nor can they rely on baseball being as well known over here as basketball is. So that is why an organiza-

tion as profit-oriented as the MLB has decided to focus on low-key development aid for the Old World.

Small deliberately chose to concentrate solely on schools in Berlin. "Our philosophy is to start right down at the roots so that baseball can grow in Europe," he said. "Give kids bats and balls, one kid after another, and they will hopefully grow up feeling baseball is their game. Not an American game, but their very own."

The core of this baseball promotion is the Pitch, Hit and Run school sport program, which has been underway

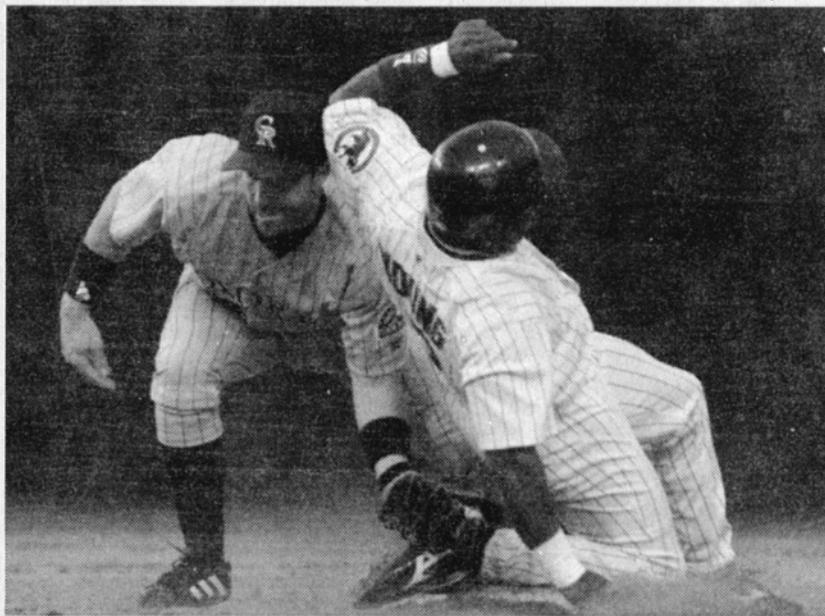
since 1996. Its aim is to teach the three basic techniques to children from the age of 10. Organizers say that 90,000 German students have taken part in the program. Given their shortage of funds, the 800 German schools that are participating are particularly grateful for being supplied with equipment free of charge, says George S. Pascal, head of the marketing agency ITMS, which represents MLB interests in Germany. Unlike the NFL, which pays scant attention to local infrastructure, the MLB also cooperates with the national baseball association,

which handles local school sport programs, spots talented youngsters and encourages them to join clubs.

The German Baseball and Softball Association (DBV), which like most German sports associations is mainly run by unpaid volunteers but has almost doubled its membership to nearly 30,000 in 10 years, has no fear of contact with its Big Brother. "They need us to implement the program and we need them to finance it," says DBV vice-president Frank Wagner, who adds that MLB financial backing amounts to several hundred thousand deutsche marks a year.

But Small makes no bones about the fact that his organization is no charity. "We are a corporation, a brand name like McDonald's and Coca-Cola. Sooner or later, our investment will have to pay dividends in the form of TV coverage, sponsorship agreements and the sale of licensed goods." Since the major league opened the season outside North America, in Tokyo, for the first time this year, club owners have grown aware, he says, of international marketing opportunities.

While baseball has become the No. 1 sport in Japan, Europe is now seen as the game's No. 1 market development priority, Small says. "Two major developments will take place in Europe in the next five to 10 years," he feels. For one, there will be a European professional league. Talks with investors and associations are, he says, already underway. For another, major league teams have indicated they will play in Europe. "The market is ready for it," MLB's emissary says confidently.



Sliding toward success: Baseball hopes to make it big in Germany.

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