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Virginia's Boy Wonders

The southeast corner of the state was no hardball hotbed—until a pair of AAU programs produced six current major league starters, including five first-round draft picks, in a span of eight years

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LATE IN the afternoon of June 18, 2006, a routine Sunday on the major league calendar, the Minnesota Twins' Michael Cuddyer, the Washington Nationals' Ryan Zimmerman and the New York Mets' David Wright batted in rapid succession. They were playing in different games in different cities, but anyone who had MLB's Extra Innings package and nimble fingers on the remote could see every pitch. ¶ Marvin (Towny) Townsend was sitting on his couch in Chesapeake, Va., five years into a fight with throat cancer. He had lost half of his tongue, part of his esophagus and the use of his left arm. Now the cancer was making its way toward his lungs. One of the few things he could still do was channel surf. He watched Cuddyer stroke a single to center. Then he saw Zimmerman hit a game-winning home run. After Wright came through with a single of his own, Townsend turned to his older son, Sean, and shouted in a gravelly voice: "This is the best thing ever!"

Townsend, who coached high school and college baseball in Virginia for 30 years, died 10 months later at 54, survived by his wife, two sons and a legion of major league players from Chesapeake and the bordering town of Virginia Beach. Six of them—Wright, Zimmerman, Cuddyer, the Tampa Bay Rays' B.J. Upton and the Arizona Diamondbacks' Justin Upton and Mark Reynolds—are burgeoning stars. And except for Zimmerman, all play for teams in the mix for playoff spots. If Townsend were alive today, he would need more televisions.

Chesapeake and Virginia Beach, part of the coastal region of Virginia formerly known as Tidewater and now called Hampton Roads, may be America's most unlikely baseball hotbed. The combined population of the two cities is less than 700,000. Locals like to say that the temperature in the winter can drop from 70° to 20° in a matter of hours, making it difficult to schedule games year-round. For much of the 20th century, the most notable major leaguer from the area was Washington Senators lefthander Chuck Stobbs, famous mainly for giving up a 565-foot home run to Mickey Mantle in 1953.

"For a long time this was a place you could ignore," says Billy Swoope, who scouts the Mid-Atlantic for the Chicago Cubs and is the majors' only full-time scout based in Hampton Roads. "It was completely barren." (The area, which also includes Newport News, Hampton, Norfolk, Portsmouth and Suffolk, has long been known for producing pro football and basketball players, including Kenny Easley, Bruce Smith, Michael Vick, Alonzo Mourning and Allen Iverson.)

Townsend believed that his favorite sport needed a lifeline. So in 1992 he launched the area's first AAU baseball program, which came to be called the Virginia Blasters after Townsend's adult-league team. Needing opponents, he persuaded his friend Gary Wright to launch a rival program, the Tidewater Drillers. Cuddyer, David Wright and the Uptons played for the Blasters. Zimmerman played for the Drillers. Reynolds played for both. From 1997 through 2005 those two AAU programs produced five first-round draft picks, a tide unlike any the area had ever seen.

Scouts were dumbfounded. Baseball talent is typically abundant in Southern California, Florida and Texas, not clustered in a small corner of southeast Virginia. But here were six future major leaguers, living no more than 20 miles apart, hitting at the same batting cage, working out at the same gym, sometimes playing on the same field. They knew each other's parents and prom dates. If a scout went to see one, he would wind up catching four or five.

"Sometimes the stars just line up, and it's hard to explain why," says Reynolds, now 25 and the Diamondbacks' third baseman. "It's a pretty incredible thing. But without Coach Townsend, I really don't think any of it ever happens."

GROWING UP in Philadelphia, Townsend learned to hit by swinging at bottle caps with a sawed-off broomstick. His father would sit on a picnic table and fling the bottle caps through the air, letting the breeze blow them in different directions, like knuckleballs. When he began coaching, Townsend used the same hand-eye drill with his players, except he traded the metal bottle caps for plastic coffee lids, believing they better withstood the punishment. He could toss the coffee lids from all angles, making them duck and dive like curveballs and sliders.

After his junior season at Campbell University in 1974, Townsend was drafted by the Boston Red Sox; he spent two years in the minors and then became the baseball coach at Virginia Wesleyan College in Norfolk. "Right when I got there he had us take batting practice with those coffee lids," says

Matt Sinnen, Townsend's first recruit at Virginia Wesleyan. Townsend reasoned that if a hitter could make solid contact with the narrow edge of a coffee lid, he would have no trouble squaring up a baseball about eight times as thick.

Over the next three decades Townsend experimented with every conceivable brand of plastic lid, trying to find the one that best mimicked the flight of a baseball. When Cuddyer, now the Twins' rightfielder, and Wright, the Mets' third baseman, were in elementary school and started taking hitting lessons with Townsend, he pitched them Cool Whip lids. "It's how we all learned to hit," says Wright, 25. "I didn't know it was different from what they were doing anywhere else. I thought everybody was hitting lids."

Cuddyer was the oldest of the group, by nearly four years, and by the time he was 11 Townsend was introducing him as a "future professional baseball player." Townsend knew that his star pupils had potential but worried they would not get enough training in the local youth leagues, so he began to expand the Blasters program. In 1993 Townsend had only a 14-and-under squad led by Cuddyer, so he talked two of his adult-league teammates, Manny Upton and Allan Erbe, into coaching a new 11-and-under team that would include Manny's nine-year-old son, B.J. (Manny's six-year-old son, Justin, was not old enough to play and served as the batboy.)

B.J. Upton played second base for the 11-and-under Blasters, and Wright played shortstop, a middle infield with terrific upside that wasn't yet apparent. B.J. was so skinny that coaches constantly ordered him to bunt, fearing that he could not muscle the ball to the outfield. Wright, on the other hand, was so pudgy that opposing coaches told each other, "We can take advantage of that chunky shortstop." Whenever the Blasters hit the road, they took with them a bag of baseballs and a bag of Cool Whip lids. If it rained, players retreated to their hotel and found a conference room where they could hit the lids.

The Blasters did not charge dues—the team raised money through fund-raisers and other donations—but they did have contracts, mandating that every player maintain at least a 2.5 grade-point average. Townsend scouted youth leagues for talent, and Erbe wrote playbooks filled with diagrams and explanations on how to cover bunts and defend first-and-third situations. Wright often complained that Erbe spent too much time on defense, but years later, when Wright was in the Mets' farm system, Erbe received an e-mail from the address Met3Bagger. It read, "I play well off the line and I run a lot of coverage 2," a direct reference to one of the Blasters' bunt defenses.

By 1994 the Blasters had six teams, one for each age group from nine through 14. B.J. Upton, who had been playing with kids two years older, moved down a year to team with Reynolds, the lanky infielder with huge hands whose family had moved to Virginia Beach from Kentucky. Reynolds had initially signed on with a rival league, whose president soon took Reynolds out of his age group; the league official was concerned about "the safety of other players" because Reynolds was hitting the ball too hard for anyone else his age to catch it.

Townsend was building a powerhouse, and he tried to lure Sinnen, his former player at Virginia Wesleyan, to coach one of the teams. But Sinnen wanted a challenge and opted to coach for the Drillers instead. His best player was a soft-handed shortstop from Virginia Beach who had slipped under Townsend's radar. Zimmerman was the smoothest fielder in Hampton Roads, but he had a hard time putting on weight and a lot of coaches assumed he would not be able to generate power. "I offered to throw him a party if he could ever crack 100 pounds," says Zimmerman's father, Keith.

When Ryan Zimmerman was 10, in his first season with the Drillers, he went 27 for 32 in an AAU tournament in Kansas City, Mo. When Wright was 12, he hit seven triples in a doubleheader in Manassas, Va. And when B.J. Upton was 16, facing Drillers ace Justin Jones, he hit a 92-mph fastball off Jones's left forearm, sending him to Sentara Leigh Hospital in Norfolk with a bone bruise.

Stories about the boys started to sound like myths. "We grew up," says B.J. Upton, now 24 and the Rays' centerfielder, "by pushing each other all the time."

IN 1997 the Twins drafted Cuddyer with the No. 9 pick, making Townsend's earliest prediction come true. Wright, Reynolds, Zimmerman and the Uptons were not even in high school yet, but they understood the significance. From then on, scouts would have to stop by Hampton Roads in case another Cuddyer came along. "I remember telling myself, I want to do the same thing he did," says Wright.

By the time Wright turned 16, his baby fat had turned to muscle and he had developed the swing he uses today. In the 1999 AAU national championships in Cleveland, he hit a 400-foot rocket over the centerfield fence that slammed into an old oak tree. As Wright rounded the bases, a six-foot branch fell from the tree and landed in somebody's backyard. Video of the blast, taken through a chain-link fence, became an underground favorite in Chesapeake. Ron Smith, who coached Wright's team along with Erbe, watched the grainy footage again last month and said, "Just like Roy Hobbs."

The future big leaguers all knew each other, but because of age differences and AAU affiliations, no more than two of them had ever played on the same team. But in 2000 a Virginia Beach coach, Lee Banks, put together a fall showcase team called the Mets, finally bringing the group together. It was one of the greatest collections of teenage talent ever assembled. The roster included Wright, Reynolds, Zimmerman and B.J. Upton. Justin Upton, still too young, was a pinch runner. For the first time they were neither Blasters nor Drillers; they were representing Hampton Roads, finishing the work that Cuddyer started. "Nobody," says Cuddyer, 29, "is more proud of those guys than I am."

For Banks, the hardest part of managing the team was filling out the lineup card. Because all the players were shortstops, Banks had to rotate them among shortstop, second base and third base. It was good training for the future, when Wright, Reynolds and Zimmerman would become third basemen, and Cuddyer and both Uptons would move to the outfield. The Mets played 25 games, traveling up and down the Eastern seaboard, passing time by picking on Justin Upton. "We made fun of him because he was the smallest," says Zimmerman, who turned 24 on Sept. 28. "Now he's bigger than all of us."

By 2003 Reynolds and Zimmerman were at the University of Virginia, Wright and B.J. Upton were in the minor leagues, and Justin Upton was at Great Bridge High in Chesapeake. From the time Justin was 10, playing for the Blasters, he was drawing intentional walks as if he were Barry Bonds. The Diamondbacks drafted him No. 1 in '05, and two years later, just before his 20th birthday, he joined the rest of the group in the major leagues. They studied each other's batting lines nightly. At the '06 All-Star Game in Pittsburgh, as Wright prepared for the Home Run Derby, he received a text message from B.J. Upton: DON'T EMBARRASS THE AREA. Wright pounded 16 home runs in the first round.

The players' parents would see each other around town, at the post office or the grocery store, and shake their heads in disbelief. This year, when the Diamondbacks played the Nationals in Washington, the Upton family sat with the Reynolds family, watching their sons' team play against Zimmerman's team—Blasters-Drillers all over again. "It was really weird," Manny Upton says. "We looked at each other like, Haven't we been doing this since they were 10?"

SINCE TOWNSEND'S death the Blasters have all but disappeared—only one team, 13-and-under, remains—while the Drillers have taken control of the area. Sinnen, still a Drillers coach, has a term he uses when one of his infielders makes a particularly nifty pickup. He calls it a "Zim play."

Although Zimmerman will be idle this October, his buddies hope to still be playing. Wright, Reynolds and both Uptons are in position to make the playoffs. Cuddyer, recovering from a broken foot, is hoping to join them. No matter the outcome, they will meet back home afterward. They still work out together in the off-season at Fitness 19 in Chesapeake, hit the batting cages at Grand Slam U.S.A. in Virginia Beach, play in each other's charity golf tournaments and talk about where they will watch the Virginia--Virginia Tech football game. Wright throws a holiday-birthday party at an area lounge and pays for a block of hotel rooms to make sure no one has to drive home afterward.

"Nothing has changed that much," says Wright. "We still do everything together."

Their club is growing. Other major leaguers from Hampton Roads include relievers Clay Rapada, 27, of the Detroit Tigers; Josh Rupe, 26, of the Texas Rangers; and Bill Bray, 25, of the Cincinnati Reds. Prominent minor leaguers include first baseman--outfielder Jason DuBois, 29, of the Cubs; righthander Justin Orenduff, 25, of the Los Angeles Dodgers; infielder Matt Smith, 25, of the Mets; and lefthander Justin Jones, 24, of the Nationals (the same Justin Jones whom B.J. Upton struck on the forearm eight years earlier). Townsend followed all of them on the Internet, jotting their stats in a notebook alongside Cuddyer's and Wright's and Reynolds's and Zimmerman's and the Uptons'.

Townsend died at the beginning of the baseball season, in April 2007, so his players mourned from a distance. They reminisced about his joyful spirit (he once walked onto the field with a snorkel and a rubber duck and soaked his team with a water gun), his notorious temper (he was ejected from games as a player, manager, fan and parent), and his creative ways to help young people learn. A statement from Wright, read at the funeral, began, "I could go on for days about what Coach Townsend has taught me."

Walk through the front door of the Townsend house, and you are greeted by a quote from Babe Ruth, painted above an interior doorway: I WON'T BE HAPPY UNTIL WE HAVE EVERY BOY IN AMERICA BETWEEN THE AGES OF 6 AND 16 WEARING A GLOVE AND SWINGING A BAT. The quote pretty well sums up Townsend's life mission. "I painted it," says his widow, Cathy, "but it's hard for me to look at sometimes."

In his final months Townsend thought a lot about bottle caps and coffee lids. He could not coach much anymore, but he could still help the next generation hit. So he met with a NASA engineer to design his own plastic lid, flexible enough that it would not break, aerodynamic enough that it would not flutter. He called it the Towny Townsend Hitting Disc and found a plastics company in Suffolk to manufacture it in bulk. Cuddyer and Wright helped him film an instructional DVD. When Townsend died, there were still 20,000 discs sitting in his garage.

Cathy did not want to keep them and did not want to throw them away, so she followed through on her husband's plans to sell them online (hittingdisc.com)—50 discs to a bag. She has been selling them ever since, as many as nine bags per day. Most of her orders come from California, Florida and Texas, with some from as far away as Australia. Now only a few boxes are left in the garage, and Cathy is getting ready to order more. "I'd like this to be part of his legacy," she says.

Her younger son, Chase, is 22 and helping her with the business. Sean is 26 and coaching the junior varsity baseball team down the road at Great Bridge High. Last season Great Bridge played a game at nearby Western Branch High, and as the team bus pulled onto the Western Branch campus, a handful of kids were assembled on a patch of grass. Great Bridge players pointed at the kids and then motioned to Sean. "Look! Look!" they chirped. Sean glanced out the window and saw his father's vision sprung to life. The kids were hitting Towny's discs.

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