



BEYOND THE COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE

with Claire Reitmann-Grout

"Changing One Swiss Kid at a Time"

When I played softball in college I never imagined myself coaching. But one Swiss kid after another taught me the joy of coaching this summer.

On the first Wednesday of every month, the Wil Devils host the Swiss Baseball Academy for kids from the Eastern (Ost) region. The Academy is made up of about 30 kids, aged 12 to 16, who are considered to be the best of the best baseball players in the region. The Junior Swiss National Team is chosen from this group of players.

My friend Christina, a Division I player from California State University Northridge, and I were invited to help coach the Academy Ost while playing for the Devils this summer. Our first time with the Academy, we showed up at the field expecting to help out with whatever needed to be done, but we ended up running the entire practice and being the leaders for the whole summer. Neither of us have ever played baseball, but the basic fundamentals of throwing, catching, and fielding are pretty much the same in baseball and softball, so pretending to be experts wasn't too far off.

Each practice at the Academy we started off having the kids run, stretch, throw and then we moved into defense. Most of the kids were not English speakers (a common challenge throughout our summer in Switzerland), so we demonstrated the drills for them to copy. A few of the kids had American or Canadian parents so they were fluent in English. Christina and I quickly picked out these kids and they became our helpers in translating and relaying messages during practice.

We helped with the Academy four times this summer and got to know the kids well. We give nick names like "little Jeter" to a boy who always wore a Derek Jeter jersey and "Linccum," after the San Francisco Giants pitcher, to another boy who



had a cannon for an arm. Each time we had academy practice Christina and I tried to do things a little differently to keep the kids interested and excited. We encouraged the kids to be loud and talk to each other as they played and tried new drills that they had never practiced before. I think they liked having two "Crazy American" girls coaching and cheering them on because it was so different from what they were used to in their baseball clubs.

Here are five of the most memorable moments that Christina and I experienced with Academy Ost this summer:

#1. During one practice, I explained to the kids why they should pick up the ball with their bare hands after bobbling a grounder. I told them that it was faster to grab the ball and set their feet to throw instead of picking the ball up with their glove, transferring it to their throwing hand, and then taking a step to throw. I wasn't sure how much the kids understood, but on the next play the ball

bounced off one of the boy's gloves and at first he reached for it with his glove. Right then, I felt like I could see the wheels turning in his head about our last conversation. He stopped himself, picked it up with his bare hand and made a great throw. Seeing the kids take in information and actually use it on the field was so rewarding for me. I felt like a proud coach at that moment.

#2. One of Christina's best (and funniest) moments of the Academy was when a little boy, maybe about 12 or 13, missed a ball right through his legs and yelled *scheisse* (no translation needed for that one, ha). This very proper and well-mannered kid swore loudly in the middle of practice. It was hard not to laugh and encourage the behavior. I think at home we probably would have yelled "watch your language," but because we didn't know the language we laughed it off and hit him another ground ball. Being a role model is tough sometimes.

#3. At the end of one hot practice in July, Christina and I pulled out a tarp and a hose for some slip-and-slide. The kids had never done it before! I was surprised

because growing up in California hot weather, I remember always begging my parents to let me run and slide on my Crocodile Mile slip-and-slide (ruining our grass). But I guess that is an American thing. All of the kids ran and slid multiple times, laughing and cheering each other on. After about a half hour they were wet and happy even though a lot of them had to ride the train home... sorry parents!

#4. During one of the Academy scrimmages the bases were loaded with no outs and one of the older boys was up to bat. He hit a bloop fly ball to the shortstop. Short made a charging catch just inches off the ground. The runners were all off base because they didn't think the ball would be caught, and the shortstop tossed the ball to second for the second out, and then the second baseman threw the ball to first for the 3rd and final out. Triple play. Pretty amazing! It was only the second triple play I had ever seen in all my years of being around the game.

#5. Out of all of the players in the Academy one boy named AJ, maybe about 14, really stood out at practice because he LOVES baseball. He showed up to practice wearing all Under Armour gear, Oakley sunglasses, and a silver chain like major leaguers in the U.S. wear. He even walked with the kind of baseball swagger you see around college baseball fields. If you looked at him, you might think he was an American. Everything AJ does on the field he does hard. When he throws the ball, he chucks it, and he swings for the fence from both sides of the plate (he is a good hitter, too, by the way).

Aside from dressing the part, and playing hard, I could tell he loved baseball by the way he pitches. He smiled on the mound, which was really cute for a 14-year-old boy. When I was 14 and pitching, I was doing everything BUT smiling, but here was AJ in Switzerland, throwing pitches as hard as he could at the little batters and smiling away every time the ball hit the catcher's glove.

One of the highlights of a scrimmage game was when AJ threw a knuckle ball for a strike during the game. The catcher called the pitch, AJ got this excited look in his eye, and threw a nasty pitch right into the glove. The batter had no clue what was going on, and was shocked the pitch with no spin was a strike. AJ was delighted.

After the inning was over AJ came into the dugout with the rest of



his team and he ran straight to me.

"Hey, Claire, did you see that knuckle ball?" AJ asked proudly.

"That was an awesome pitch. Great job."

I gave him a big high five.

After working with the Swiss Baseball Academy for four months, I could really see the improvement that the kids had made and I think the coaches of the Swiss National Team are going to have to make some tough decisions. I wish all of the kids could make the team because they put forth so much effort and hard work during the summer, but of course, everyone playing and winning is not the nature of competitive sports programs. I realized too that some of the younger kids probably don't have a good chance of making the team because the difference between how far a 16-year-old and a 12-year-old can hit a ball is pretty significant. Not because they are better ball players, but because, well, the older players are bigger and stronger.

There was one boy in particular, named Darryl, who couldn't have been more than 4'8" (we called him Big D). He made diving plays at shortstop, and took hacks while up at the plate. Big D was impressive, but unfortunately, because there are a lot more older kids, he probably doesn't have a shot at making the team, and I certainly wasn't going to be the one to tell him. During practice I pulled a few of the younger kids aside and told them that in everything they do, in baseball or in life, there will always be someone bigger, stronger, or smarter, but to not let them intimidate you. I said that if you work harder than those kids (people... whoever), put a little more effort into what you are doing, the hard work and hustle won't go unnoticed. Coaches, parents, and other players will like it and they will want you on their team.

I realize I said this in English to a bunch of 12 and 13-year-olds who speak German and only basic school English, but I hope they got the message. I really am a believer in hard work paying off, and I hope the kids in the Swiss Baseball Academy can learn that lesson playing baseball, just like I did playing softball.

Working with the Academy was one of the highlights of the summer for me. At home growing up playing baseball and softball is normal, but here with these kids it's a novelty. Academy practice is a great place for them to learn and play their favorite sport in a group of kids who are just like them. I miss these kids already.

A few days after the Academy ended, I watched the football movie *The Blind Side* with a few of my softball friends from the Wil Devils. While watching the movie, I said that some day, I wanted to be like Sandra Bullock's character, a woman who helps a young boy change his life through sports.

"Claire, you already are. One Swiss kid at a time."

I didn't believe my friend at first, but looking back on my time with the Swiss Baseball Academy, I hope she is right.

