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BASEBALL TEACHER NEVER LOST HIS PASSION FOR THE GAME

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Article Text:

Billy Horton grew up the youngest of eight kids, a perfect scenario for someone with a passion for baseball. There was always someone around to help him hone game fundamentals. Even when his dad worked the swing shift, his mom went out to play catch.

The love of the game never left, holding on through high school and college, into professional ball, and now, back with young players as part of Cactus Athletic Camps, a business he began last year. Along with private lessons, Horton, who lives near 56th Street and Sweetwater Avenue, offers baseball clinics and five-day camps for boys and girls. Horton will hold four camps this month, with the first starting Monday. Each camp runs from 8 a.m. to noon weekdays. The cost is \$125, with a 20 percent discount for siblings.

It was his Christian faith that moved him to create a business, asking God for guidance to have a career to use his talents. "I don't talk about the Bible at camps but we do talk about hard work and overcoming adversity," Horton said. "For me, that's what Cactus means. I'm out to be a positive influence." Horton, in his early 30s, has worked with hundreds of boys and girls from the Valley over the years to help them improve their baseball skills. He hopes one day to open softball camps. "But a lot of the girls I work with are diehard baseball players," he said.

With school out for many children, Horton is preparing to start a round of clinics and camps. The aim is to help kids with the fundamental techniques of the sport: throwing, hitting, working the infield, the outfield. Horton works on running and strength training, helping kids build strong core muscles. Horton wants kids to see baseball -- and other sports -- as a means to build self-confidence. "Little League isn't formed to build major league players. It's to build better citizens," he said.

For Zayne Mowen, who turns 10 on Wednesday, getting to work with Horton is a treat. Zayne, who lives near 28th Street and Shea Boulevard, said attending Horton's baseball camps and taking private lessons helped him with stamina. "You learn all the basic things of baseball and it helps to give you more energy," he said. Zayne's mother, Lisa Mowen, likes that Horton isn't intense. "The kids get to play for fun and it's not a competition. Billy really is a big kid, himself." Horton wants the kids to keep to the ideal of what baseball should be.

Cactus Athletic Camps

What: Five-day baseball camps

When: 8 a.m. to noon Mondays through Fridays in June.

Cost: \$125 per student with a 20 percent sibling discount.

Where:

* June 4-8 at Gold Dust Elementary School at the Nancie Lane Park, 3602 E. Cholla St. in Phoenix.

* June 11-15 at Desert Shadows Middle School on the Rod Rubino Field, 5858 E. Sweetwater Ave., in Scottsdale.

* June 18-22 at Cactus High School at the junior varsity field, 6330 W. Greenway Road, in Glendale.

* June 25-29 at Black Mountain Elementary School at the Kiwanis Park, 33606 N 60th St., in Scottsdale.

Information: www.cactuscamps.com or call (480) 272-9167.