



## The Star-Ledger

### Final act of sportsmanship by kids is most valuable play of all

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BRISTOL, Conn. – The moment was entirely unscripted, and that's what made it so perfect.

The kids from Staten Island were taking their celebratory lap with the championship banner along the warning track, still glowing from the walk-off home run that lifted them to the Little League World Series.

They turned at the left-field foul pole.

And then, very abruptly, they all stopped.

"You guys go first," Joe Calabrese, the winning pitcher, told the kids from Livingston.

"Thanks," Zach Gray, the losing pitcher, replied, and he and his teammates led both teams past the New Jersey fans, who were standing and cheering along the third-base line.

You constantly hear about how poor sportsmanship is ruining youth sports. You might have heard about what happened on this very field in Bristol one day earlier, when a coach from Vermont tried to make up for his bonehead mistake by telling his players to screw up to let the other team score.

You will probably hear another tale of adults crossing the line when the teams gather in Williamsport, Pa., next week, since forged birth certificates and overbearing parents have been as much a part of this event lately as fastballs and home runs.

But then you get a moment like this, when a group of 12-year-olds remind you that sportsmanship isn't always just some concept from faded black-and-white films, that it actually still exists.

The kids from Staten Island, at their moment of triumph, turned and thought about the losers. And with that one simple act of kindness, everybody left a winner.

"They played so great today and gave us such a fight," Calabrese said after the 2-1 victory, "we wanted to let them run in front of us when they got in front of their fans. They deserved it."

The Livingston players, who were trotting at a respectful distance behind the victors, were surprised.

"It was very nice of them to do that," said Nick Ebert, who had given his team a 1-0 lead with a home run in the third. "They're all nice kids. During the whole week we hung out with them. None of us were fighting. We all got along."

And to think, just 24 hours earlier, another championship game here ended with anger, ejections and hard feelings.

Vermont had a 9-7 lead in the final inning when manager Denis Place realized he had violated a Little

League rule by failing to get one of his players on the field for three defensive outs.

If his team closed out the victory, it would have to forfeit. Instead of accepting defeat and showing his players how to lose respectfully, Place told his players to let New Hampshire score two runs so the game would go extra innings.

He instructed his pitcher to throw wild pitches. He told his outfielders to drop fly balls. New Hampshire scored one run, but then its manager got wise to what was going on and told his players to strike out intentionally so they could protest.

Can you imagine? Two teams were trying to lose.

In a Little League game.

"It was crystal clear to me that (Vermont's manager) was not going to let the kids decide the outcome of the game," New Hampshire's Mark McCauley said. "He was going to cover his tail. He was doing what was in the best interest of his team. I had to do the same for my team."

Instead, they all made a mockery of the game. Place and his pitcher were ejected. New Hampshire won in a forfeit. But everyone lost.

Fans were still talking about that game when Livingston and Staten Island arrived at the field last night. Livingston was trying to become the latest local Little League team to steal our attention in August, to follow the lead of the Toms River East team that won the title eight years ago.

The Essex suburb fell in love with these kids, of course. Jon Pena, the kid they called "Senor Laddy" because he's half Irish and Cuban, provided the power. German Valdez, with just three years in baseball after making the switch from soccer, gave the speed. Gray baffled hitters with a knuckle changeup, a pitch his brother, Josh, had taught him.

"It was just a kick seeing the crawl on ESPN with Livingston, N.J., on there," said Bob Pozner, a longtime league executive and umpire, as he watched from the back row in the bleachers. "This is a dream of a lifetime – absolutely, a dream of a lifetime."

That dream ended when a kid named Frank Smith knocked a Gray fastball over the outfield fence. But the lesson that came next was just as valuable as the trip to Williamsport.

One team stepped aside and let the other team lead its celebration. Just when you thought the ugly moments from adults had ruined youth sports, a group of 12-year-olds do something to make everything seem right.

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