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Flag Day: Koa Sports adds girls football

Potomac resident David Sims was pleasantly surprised when his 7-year-old daughter, Devon, plopped down next to him one Sunday, eager to watch the Redskins game.

That probably would not have happened had Devon and her older sister Sydney, 11, not played in Koa Sports' Oct. 31 launch of Montgomery County's first-ever girls flag football league earlier in the day.

"She was really interested in [the game]," Sims said as he watched former Redskin Brian Mitchell instruct 70-plus participants in Sunday's practice at Luxmanor Elementary School. "That wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for [Koa]."

Koa Sports is the brainchild of former Whitman left-handed pitcher Tony Korson and Wayne Cohen, a lawyer and entrepreneur from Potomac.

The organization, which draws most of its clientele from Bethesda, Potomac and Rockville, offers elite-level instruction for both boys and girls in football, basketball, field hockey, softball and lacrosse, at the recreational and travel levels.

"I think the unique thing about Koa is, I'm the father of a son [Jake] who plays football, basketball and baseball, and they provide that for the boys, but what's terribly missing is the flag football, softball, field hockey for the girls," Sims said. "I'm extremely happy they've started this program. It's recreational but it's also instructionally taught and it's fantastic."

Korson originally planned on pursuing a professional baseball career. When that was derailed, he set out to make good use of his passion for America's pastime.

That set the foundation for Koa.

"A scout came to watch me pitch when I was in college," said Korson, who played at Florida Gulf Coast University and holds the program's single season earned-run average record (1.39 in 2003-04). "But he looked at me, and I'm 5-foot-11, about 180 pounds and he said, 'You'll never make it past A ball.' ... And that was completely objective, fair and true. I was a good player but I didn't have that next-level ability to make it in the big leagues."

So, Korson paid attention in his business classes. And when he graduated in 2005 with a degree in finance, set out to start his own baseball academy.

Koa officially opened its doors in January, and since then has welcomed 1,400 new families. The majority of its athletes are kindergarten through eighth-graders, except for baseball, where Korson runs some college recruitment programs. But with the organization's rapid growth, Korson and Cohen plan to extend more of Koa's programming to high school students as well.

The word Koa means "strength" in Hawaiian. Through the organization's programs, according to the website, athletes strengthen their skills and their minds to help them both on and



Casey Leach (left) and Haley Gerald, both age 10 from Olney, run drills during girls flag football league practice Sunday in Rockville.

off the field.

Koa's coaching staff is what most separates it from other area youth sports organizations. Athletes are given the opportunity to work mostly with former collegiate and professional athletes. Mitchell and former Kansas City Royals and Houston Astros player Buddy Biancalana are members of Koa's advisory board.

"There are three benefits to not having parents coach," Cohen said. "One, it's good to learn life experience from someone who's not mom and dad on the field. Second, you're learning the right way from someone who truly understands the sport, and that's extremely important in player development. Third, the Koa coaches don't have any skin in the game, so to speak, so they're not going to favor anyone."

Added Sims: "You can get to a certain level of expertise, but just because you play doesn't mean you can coach. Koa finds unique people who are athletes and can translate that to kids. Sometimes you just want to be a fan. I'm at the point where I just want to be the fan for my kids."

Koa has come a long way in 11 months. Korson and Cohen plan to continue to grow the local market for a while, but hope to franchise it nationally in the near future.

"If you had asked me when I was 23 if playing catch with a 10-year-old is what I thought I'd do with my finance degree, I would have said, 'No way,'" Korson said. "But there's no other way I'd like to spend my time than working with these kids, teaching and coaching them. And teaching and coaching others how to work with them too."