

Dale Murphy's message gets a boost from Little League World Series

The ex-Braves star leads the efforts to encourage kids not to cut corners.

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Carolyn Kaster/Associated Press

In this Aug. 15, 2008, file photo, baseball great Dale Murphy gives little leaguers the thumbs-up during opening ceremonies of the Little League World Series in South Williamsport, Pa. Murphy wants to make sure impressionable young athletes don't cheat. In an era when steroids and major league drug testing make sports headlines, the two time National League MVP has made it his mission to encourage young players to avoid shortcuts through his "I Won't Cheat Foundation."

By Associated Press

Little Leaguers like to walk, talk, pitch and hit like big leaguers. Former major leaguer Dale Murphy just wants to make sure there's one way impressionable pint-sized sluggers don't imitate their heroes.

In an era when steroids and drug testing make sports headlines, the two-time National League MVP is on a mission to encourage young players to avoid shortcuts through his "I Won't Cheat Foundation."

Founded by Murphy five years ago, the organization's message reaches its biggest audience during nationally televised games of the Little League World Series, where players wear patches on their sleeves with "I WON'T CHEAT" in bold letters. The annual 10-day tournament begins Friday in South Williamsport, Pa.

"The main point I thought to make to the kids is that I know what you're thinking is that most of these guys are taking it," Murphy said. "But a lot of them aren't. Most of them aren't and you can still be a successful baseball player if you want to pursue it without taking this stuff."

Though he's been out of baseball for 17 years, Murphy might be the perfect voice to spread such a message, given the clean-cut image he developed as one of the game's most feared hitters in the 1980s. He hit 398 home runs over 18 seasons, most of them with the Atlanta Braves.

Murphy, who now lives in Alpine, Utah, started the organization in 2005 when performance-enhancing drugs were making news. It was in March of that year, for instance, when former St. Louis Cardinals slugger Mark McGwire refused to answer questions before Congress about steroid use during his playing career.

"It really started with the steroids issue in baseball. We were just sitting around, some of our friends ... we just started talking, maybe we should just send another message out there because the perception of the kids is that everybody is taking this," Murphy said in a telephone interview.

Little League added the patch to World Series uniforms two years ago, giving the message more visibility. Little League does not drug test tournament players, though there are no regulations that stipulate whether local leagues can or cannot test.

"I have never heard of a local league that tests, and would be very surprised to hear about it," Little League vice president Lance Van Auken wrote in an e-mail.

"Using steroids equals cheating," reads the title of Little League's position statement to parents on the drug issue.

For the most part, Little Leaguers aren't directly confronted with the possibility of taking performance-enhancing drugs, especially in younger age brackets, Murphy said. The Little League World Series, for example, is for 11- to 13-year-olds.

They might, however, be exposed to other questions that have more to do with decisions their parents and coaches make, like allowing a player to use a heavier or unregulated bat, or allowing a player from outside a league's boundaries to join a team.

It's in those instances that adults must realize they are setting a bad example, Murphy said. He also wants to educate young players to speak up as much as possible when uncomfortable with something, if not directly to a coach, then through a parent or teacher.

The foundation has since expanded its message beyond the diamond to other sports, as well as to classroom and extracurricular activities. His foundation has "I Won't Cheat" pledges for students and young athletes to sign.

The goal, he said, is to add another voice and make youngsters see the long-term consequences of their decisions.