

ews COVER STORY

Big Hurt is big surprise

Hall-of-Famer Frank Thomas coaches first base at Winnetka Park District game

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After 521 home runs in 19 seasons, former Chicago White Sox slugger Frank Thomas recently found his way to Cooperstown, N.Y., where he joined the ranks of baseball's Hall of Fame.

One of his next stops? Coaching first base at a Winnetka Park District softball game.

Thomas came to Winnetka's Skokie Playfield Aug. 6 to coach the Chiefs, a local softball team that won the Planters "Mr. Peanut's Power Hitter" contest. The grand prize for the contest was a visit from Thomas, who would serve as first-base coach for the winning team.

"This is all about fun, man," Thomas said with a grin. "It all starts right here. I played in a softball league; It's fun to come back out here and help the guys out. This was a great contest, so I was happy to be a part of it."

Aaron Polansky, a Chicago resident originally of Arlington Heights, plays for the Chiefs, which plays its 12-inch softball league games at Skokie Playfield.

A big Sox fan, Polansky decided to submit an entry to the contest, not expecting anything to come of it. Contest applicants were asked to submit a short essay explaining why Thomas — who played on the South Side from 1990-2005 — should coach their team.

"When I came across it on my Twitter feed, I thought



Frank Thomas (left) signs contest winner Aaron Polansky's baseball on Aug. 6.

there could be nothing better than having my childhood hero — and my other childhood hero, Mr. Peanut — showing up at a softball game of mine," Polansky said. "When I submitted the entry, I basically said that I needed help with my swing because I had been having a terrible season, and having the help of a professional hitter, if not the best right-handed hitter of the 1990s, come and help me ... [plus] the fact that my Winnetka Park District softball team hadn't advanced past the second round of the playoffs in the last three years, I thought that this extra push [would] give us a little more motivation to win the championship this year."

For Planters, Polansky's entry was a no-brainer. In a short 100-word essay, Senior Associate Brand Manager Courtney Dugan said Polansky's enthusiasm was "pal-

pable," and his entry was by far the clear winner out of the approximately 80 entries submitted.

While the Chiefs players were all overwhelmed by the very idea of being coached by Thomas, the Hall of Famer himself was going through his own sort of shellshock following his induction on July 27.

"It's still sinking in," Thomas said. "It really sunk in that Friday night, when I had that Hall of Fame dinner with the big boys. Then Sunday, when we received our watches [and] rings, yeah, it sunk in. I'm a Hall of Famer now."

The grass down the first-base line was painted with Thomas' number, 35, near which the Big Hurt gave his pregame speech to the team, telling them to work hard but have fun.

"Let's have a good time, [but] let's go 100 percent," Thomas said to the team

huddled around him before they took the field.

Naturally, the crowd for the game exceeded any other the Chiefs had seen all season, as friends, family and baseball enthusiasts flocked to Winnetka for a chance to see Thomas and get hats, baseballs and photographs signed. The smile on the players' faces in the dugout stretched wide, as Thomas shot the breeze about Mariano Rivera's notorious cutter and playing in various ballparks, particularly Seattle's Kingdome (now Safeco Field).

The event took on an air of surrealism for Polansky and his team, most of whom are White Sox fans.

"Not only did I not expect to win, [but] when I got the email telling me that I did win, I deleted the first email because I didn't believe that it was actually real," Polansky said. "When I got a follow-up email from the Plant-



Hall-of-Famer Frank Thomas coaches first base Aug. 6 at Winnetka's Skokie Playfield after a softball team won the Planters "Mr. Peanut's Power Hitter" contest. PHOTOS BY APRIL DAHLQUIST/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

ers representative, I thought, 'Oh, I should probably respond so I can actually win this contest.'"

The contest fielded letters from applicants all over the country — so, it was only appropriate that a Chicago-land team emerged victorious. For the Winnetka Park District, which recently renovated Skokie Playfield, the event served as a showcase for the village.

"I think it's great," Athletic Supervisor Greg Sauber said. "[Our] baseball association, the [Kenilworth-Winnetka Baseball Association], they've said the fields look great, but now that Frank's here, it's even better."

Thomas himself had praise for the village.

"I heard down by the lake is very pretty," Thomas said. "It's my first time through [Winnetka]. I'm really enjoying it so far."

With Thomas' help, the

Chiefs carried an 11-5 lead late into the game. But, their opponent, donning Chicago Blackhawks T-shirts, surged in the final inning to score a 12-11 win.

Nonetheless, with the matchup being the Chiefs' final game of the regular season, they looked to channel Thomas' hitting tips as they entered the playoffs, where they'll attempt to reach new heights.

As for Thomas, did the experience perhaps inspire him to give a second look at this coaching thing? Don't put it on the board.

"No, no, only thing I would do is manage," Thomas said, laughing. "I definitely wouldn't coach."



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