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Panthers eager to open some eyes



Darren Burks, a Rich South High School alum, is a member of the Illinois Panthers.

(Supplied photo)

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For the older players, it represents a final chance to showcase their skills in hopes of extending their baseball careers beyond the high school level.

For the younger players, it's an invitation to turn some heads and transform themselves into bona fide prospects the rest of their high school careers.

Next week provides an opportunity for every player on the Illinois Panthers baseball teams to open the door to a college baseball career and the more valuable education that goes along with it.

That's all the Panthers - composed of players from Rich Central, Hillcrest, Rich South, Rich East, Marian Catholic, Thornton and Thornridge - are asking.

"I have nothing going for college right now," said pitcher Randall Harris, who just graduated from Marian Catholic. "We want to show what we can do. We want to be looked at. It's a goal for all of us to play college baseball."

The best way for that to happen is for the Panthers, with teams of talented 17- to 19- and 14- to 15-year-olds, to compete in the MJBL Inner City Classic in Greensboro, N.C. The four-day tournament, sponsored by black colleges and the Metropolitan Junior Baseball League, begins Thursday. The Panthers are guaranteed to play at least four games, with the potential to play additional contests based on their performance.

More than 100 colleges, along with dozens of professional scouts, will peruse the 200-plus teams from across the country that will arrive in Greensboro. There will be men who hold the key to front doors of colleges throughout the country and are in possession of the combination to the safe that holds scholarship money.

"Our focus is to try to get these kids an opportunity to go to college," said Greg Burks, an assistant coach of the Panthers' 17- to 19-year-old team. "First and foremost, we want to further their education and get them to college. The best way for a lot of these kids to do that is to play baseball and receive a scholarship. We have some talented kids here. Most colleges don't scout the high schools where these kids play. They're missing the boat on these kids."

The trip to Greensboro does not require a boat, but it does require a serious financial commitment. The cost is approximately \$10,000, which includes a bus, lodging and food. The Panthers also would like to purchase some uniforms. All they have now are T-shirts and baseball pants.

"We're the first team from Illinois in five years to participate in this tournament and the only one from Illinois this year," Burks said. "The emphasis of this trip is to get these kids some exposure. But I also know we have the talent to do well and represent Illinois in a positive light."

I've covered some of these kids at the high school level and Burks' assessment is precise. The Panthers have some highly skilled players, not just athletes. These are kids who understand the game and, equally important, have a passion for it.

I told every college coach I came in contact with this past spring, from Purdue to Northern Illinois to Lewis University, that it would be worth their time and effort to scout Rich Central and, to a lesser extent, Rich South.

These kids can play.

It's no secret black youth prefer bouncing a basketball to hitting a baseball. The proof is in the pudding: blacks make up approximately 8 percent of Major League Baseball's rosters. But these kids are proof that talent is still being developed in black communities.

"This trip means a lot to us," said Darren Burks, a Rich South graduate who will attend Eastern Michigan University in the fall. "I'm playing baseball in college, but most of the kids on this team aren't as fortunate. We want to go to North Carolina and show college coaches and professional scouts that Illinois has some good African-American players."

The trip is not exclusively about baseball, however. There will be several symposiums educating players about college, from balancing their academic, athletic and social calendars to searching for opportunities that remain available.

"There's a lot at stake for these kids," Greg Burks said. "Maybe some people out there who love baseball and want kids to have an opportunity to enhance their futures are willing to help us get to North Carolina. That's what I'm hoping. This is a trip these kids will never forget the rest of their lives."