

Sports

Going yard

In charitable gesture,
Big Papi pops in for
some Wiffle Ball

Story and photo by Stan Grossfeld
GLOBE STAFF

WESTON — It was a crisp October afternoon. David Ortiz spit in his hands and slapped them together. He stood poised at home plate, bat waving. Kids wearing Ortiz jerseys gawked and squealed with delight. From far down the left-field line, the smell of sausage, onions, and peppers wafted through the air.

Colin Stievater, a crafty 10-year veteran — of life, not baseball — had made Big Papi look like a Little Leaguer on his first two pitches. Two years ago, Ortiz had had consecutive walkoff hits against the Yankees in the American League Championship Series, leading the Red Sox to the greatest comeback victory in baseball history. Now he's being dissed by a fifth-grader in the backyard of a Weston mansion.

Ortiz never played Wiffle Ball before, although as a kid in Santo Domingo he used to play a street baseball game that used a bottle cap. He said the Wiffle Ball bat seemed really small and much too light.

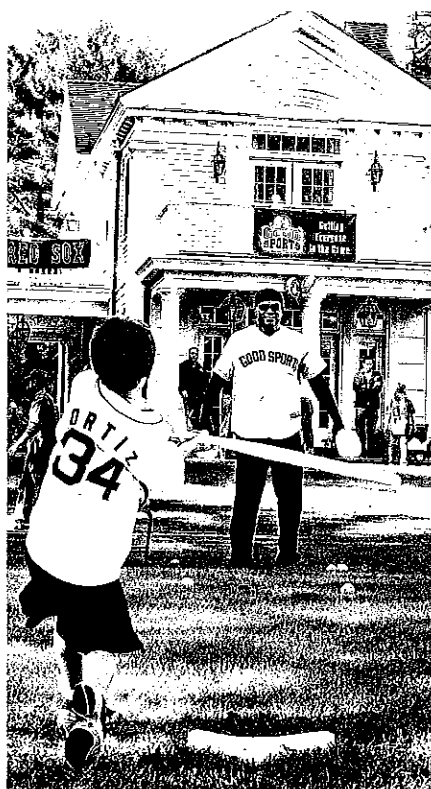
"I feel like I was hitting the ball with my arm," he said later. "It's not hard, I'm just not used to it."

But young Stievater had a bad feeling about the next pitch. Light bat or not, Ortiz is still Boston's Mr. October.

"I knew he was a really good hitter," said Stievater. "I knew he was going to hit. It was really awesome. He's such a great guy. He missed two of them but then he hit two over the Sausage Guy."

Big Papi made a big hit in more ways than one.

Three Harvard Business School graduates chipped in \$30,000 at a charity auction so that Big Papi, the Pied Piper of baseball, would play Wiffle Ball with 30 kids. The money goes to support Good Sports Inc., a Dorchester nonprofit organization that donates sporting goods for city youths.



STAN GROSSFELD/GLOBE STAFF

One youngster doesn't appear to be fooled at all by this David Ortiz Wiffle Ball offering.

Ortiz donated an afternoon in this affluent suburb to help those in some of the city's poorest sections. In some ways, it was a Robin Hood move, the designated hitter grabbing money from the rich to help the poor.

"Good Sports has been doing great things in the community," said Ortiz. "I think it's a really good thing because some kids who don't have enough money to buy sports equipment, now they'll have some sports equipment to play with."

Asked if playing sports can help stop the violence that has terrorized Boston this year, Ortiz was emphatic.

"Definitely. Definitely," he said. "Nobody

wants to be involved in things like that. They're gonna follow sports and try to stay out of trouble."

Sweet swinger

Every kid got to both pitch and hit against the Red Sox slugger during his two-hour stay.

NESN showed up to cover the bash, and the organizers even put a sign on a tree down the rightfield line that read, "Pesky Tree." The kids got all the hot dogs, sausages, and soda they wanted, plus cookies in the shape of Big Papi with the number 34 in frosting. One of the auction winners, Drew Sawyer, an investment manager, said the event was "priceless, and it goes to a great cause."

Ortiz showed the kids something he didn't show major league pitchers this year, when he smashed a team-record 54 home runs: Mercy.

Instead of hitting from the left side of the plate, he batted righty.

"You know what?" he said. "Righthanded I hit better than lefty."

Asked if that means he's a switch hitter from now on, Ortiz smiled and said, "Don't believe the hype."

When he pitched, Ortiz encouraged every kid to "see it, hit it" and tipped his pitches before he threw them. He did his Tim Wakefield knuckleball imitation and even showed a vintage Luis Tiant twist-toward-center move. When one kid took him deep, he told him to "do that against the Yankees."

The homeowner, who didn't want to be identified, gave Papi the green light when he came to take extended batting practice.

"Don't worry about breaking windows," said the homeowner. "We've got great insurance."

That didn't happen. But Papi did make every child smile, especially when he hit a wicked line drive off a life-size cutout of Randy Johnson (albeit in a Diamondbacks uniform) on the mound, turning the Big Unit into just another piece of cardboard on the manicured grass.

In a sweet and innocent way, Big Papi was heckled by a little girl as he swung at pitches thrown in every conceivable place. The 4-year-old shouted, "Come on, run, Big

Papi, run," every time Ortiz hit the ball.

Finally, Ortiz let her in on a secret.

"I hit 'em far so I don't have to run," he said laughing.

A winning partnership

Good Sports is making a difference in thousands of lives with a paid staff of just three. They pulled off the coup of the season by appealing to Ortiz's love of kids.

"Over 60 percent of kids are participating in a community sports program of some sort, and it's only 23 percent of urban kids," said Melissa Harper, executive director of Good Sports Inc. "So you're talking three times the number of kids are involved from suburban areas. And we think that's directly due to the fact that it's affordable to them and it's not affordable for disadvantaged kids."

Last year, Good Sports secured more than \$1.2 million worth of equipment. Good Sports partners with sporting goods manufacturers to turn every dollar raised into \$2 of equipment. Last year, the organization helped 42,000 kids through grants of equipment, footwear, and uniforms.

"They do a spectacular job," said Boston Mayor Thomas Menino. "If their donations to our different programs in the city weren't there, a lot of these programs wouldn't exist in Boston. You have to understand how important it is to keep kids on the ballfield or on the basketball court or on the hockey rink. You keep them involved in sports, they usually don't have time to get involved in other activities."

Dan Touhey, vice president of marketing for Spalding, is sold on the program.

"They're awesome," said Touhey. "They are committed to a cause that makes sense. They do what they say they are going to do. They're the absolute best partners you could ever have. They are passionate about getting kids to play sports."

Harper says it's a win-win partnership.

"These companies are progressive enough to know that getting kids playing sports is ultimately in their best interests," she said. "We might be turning them into lifelong athletes."

"Essentially, we're trying to get more kids in sports. We want kids to be physically active. It's a big part of their physical develop-

ment as well as their social development.

"Unfortunately, it's gotten really expensive. Kids can't play sports the way they used to. When we were growing up, you signed up for a sport in school and everything was provided for you. But now most kids have fairly limited access to sports in school and the fees are really expensive. A lot of times, they have to come with their own equipment, so for a disadvantaged family, sports have become out of reach. That's what we try to fix."

Good Sports operates in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, has partnered to help Big Papi in the Dominican Republic, and has plans to expand the project nationally. Philadelphia is the next target.

"There's a shift in the way kids play in big cities," said Harper. "Fifteen years ago, pickup games were acceptable and normal. But now in urban areas parents are afraid to let kids go into the park and play pickup games. So parents are relying on organized sports. A lot of programs have anti-violence components. They are really trying to make a difference."

Christy Pugh, Good Sports director of operations, says the benefits of sports are well-documented.

"People that play sports tend to choose healthier lifestyles, have higher self-esteem, make better choices about their health in terms of drug use and teen pregnancies," said Pugh. "But school sports, which used to be the core of how kids got involved in sports, are the first thing that gets cut."

Donation for Dorchester

Recently, Good Sports donated \$20,000 worth of equipment to the Dorchester High School football team, in conjunction with the Mark Wahlberg Youth Foundation. Dorchester coach Rich Moran says many of his players come from broken homes.

"A lot of them have trouble in the street or come from broken families," said Moran. "To get them playing football, to get them involved is so important."

Moran struggled to provide equipment for his team. Good Sports provided it.

"They hooked me up big-time," he said. "You should have seen the kids' faces when

they got the five-man [blocking] sled. They were ecstatic.

"This year, I outfitted 54 ballplayers, which is phenomenal. Before, I just couldn't get them to come out. It's fantastic. Without Good Sports helping us, it just wouldn't happen. They are so caring, it's just incredible."

But the coach also knows tragedy firsthand. Robert Foxworth, 17, a former Dorchester football player, was shot multiple times and died Sept. 30 despite heroic efforts by neighbors trying to stop the bleeding. He was Boston's 54th homicide of this year.

Foxworth wasn't on the team this year, Moran said.

"He was one of my students at school," said Moran. "Academically, he was ineligible. It was very sad."

Big hit with kids

Back on the Wiffle Ball field, Ortiz finishes batting practice by hitting lefty and turning on a slow ball. It almost hits the mansion. He holds his arms out as if he's flying and makes a beeline down the left-field line to say hello to David Littlefield, a.k.a. The Sausage Guy, whose cart is usually on Lansdowne Street, beyond the Green Monster.

Big Papi decides he'll have a sausage with peppers and onions. But just half. He has a goal for next season "to be better than this year."

Little kids who gawk at him are invited over for hugs and tickles.

"I love to be a kid," said Ortiz.

"He comes as advertised," said Pugh. "He's got a big heart. This community is really lucky to have somebody like him. He genuinely cares. He didn't think twice when we approached him with this idea. We asked him for an afternoon of his time, which is pretty valuable."

But what if he messes up his swing playing Wiffle Ball?

"We don't want that," said Pugh. "We will ask them to put the shift on and he can practice his bunting."



HOUSE PARTY: For a photo gallery of David Ortiz's day of Wiffle Ball, go to boston.com/sports