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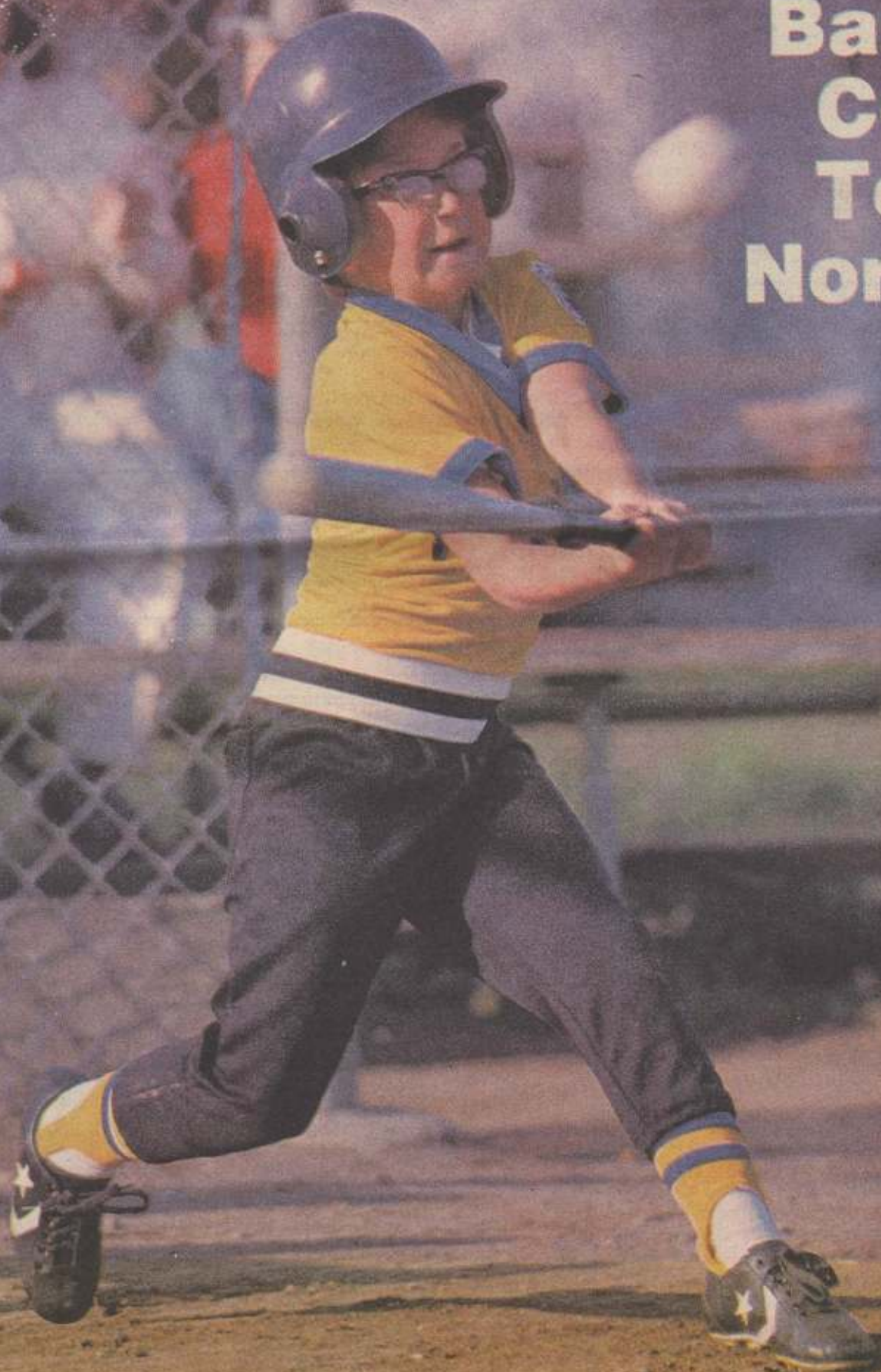
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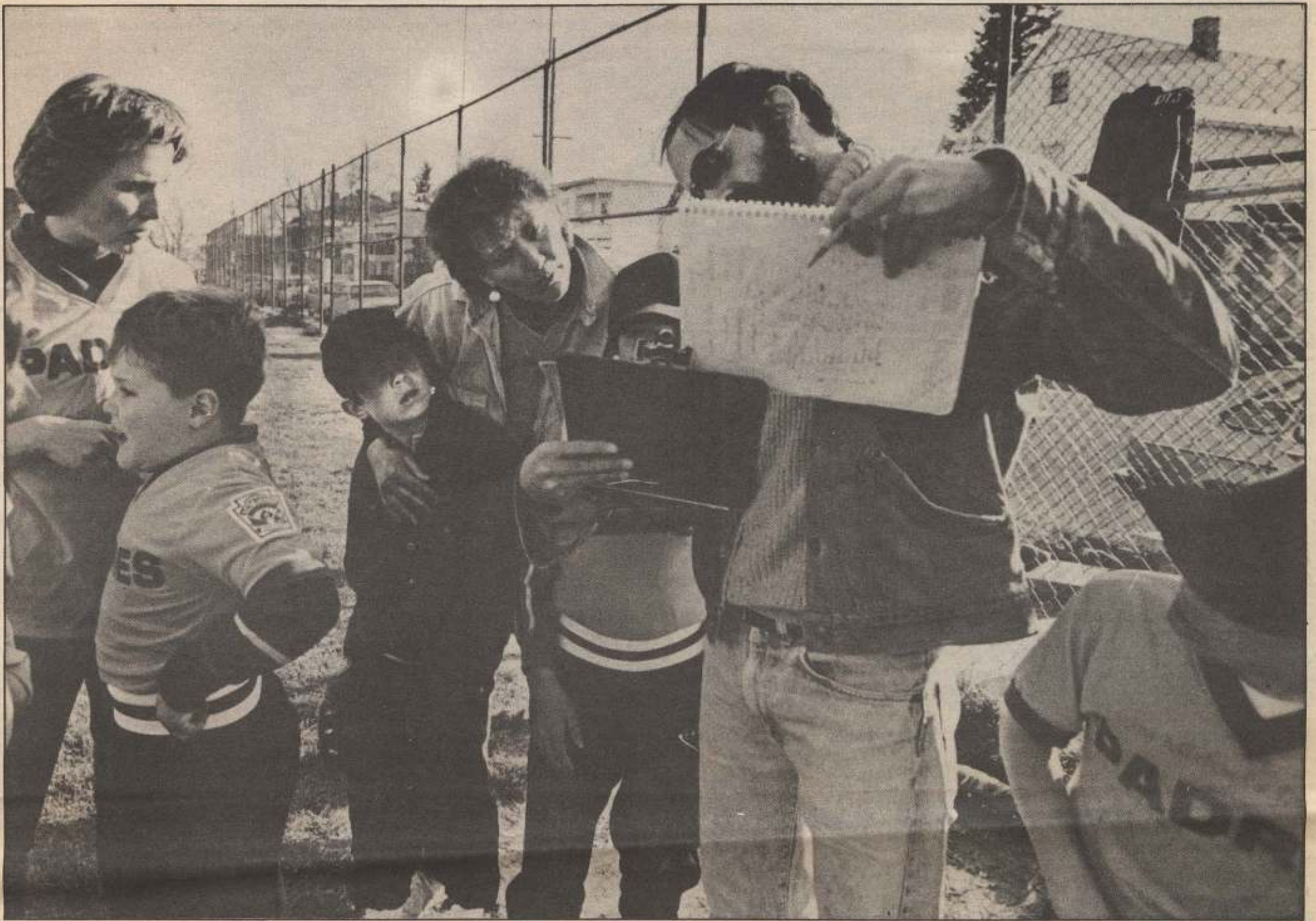
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Baseball Comes To Old North End





Padres coaches and players huddle with the lineup. Left to right, coach Ann Goering, Shane Erwin, Jamie Huard, coach Nora Ostrander, Michael Sears, coach Michael LaPierre, and Michael Boyer. Below, Braves Ricky Richards and Travis Hoffman celebrate a hit.



PLAY BALL!

The crack of bats, the screams of parents mean Little League has arrived in Burlington's inner city.

Story by DEBORAH SCHOCH

Photos by ELAINE ISAACSON

It was the top of the first inning, with the Padres at bat. A player sauntered up to home plate to take a few practice swings. The crowd quieted in anticipation.

Crack! Bat and ball met. Jason Wheel, 9, sprinted for second base as the rival Braves scrambled for the ball in the outfield. He started for third, looking over his shoulder.

"Jason — stop watching

the ball! Just run!" an onlooker yelled.

Wheel darted onward, streaking home on one knee in a classic photo-finish. He's safe, the umpire ruled. But in the first row of the bleachers, dissent continued.

"He's safe!" insisted one boy.

"No, he's out!" a Braves fan countered.

The debate is echoed in neighborhoods across Ameri-

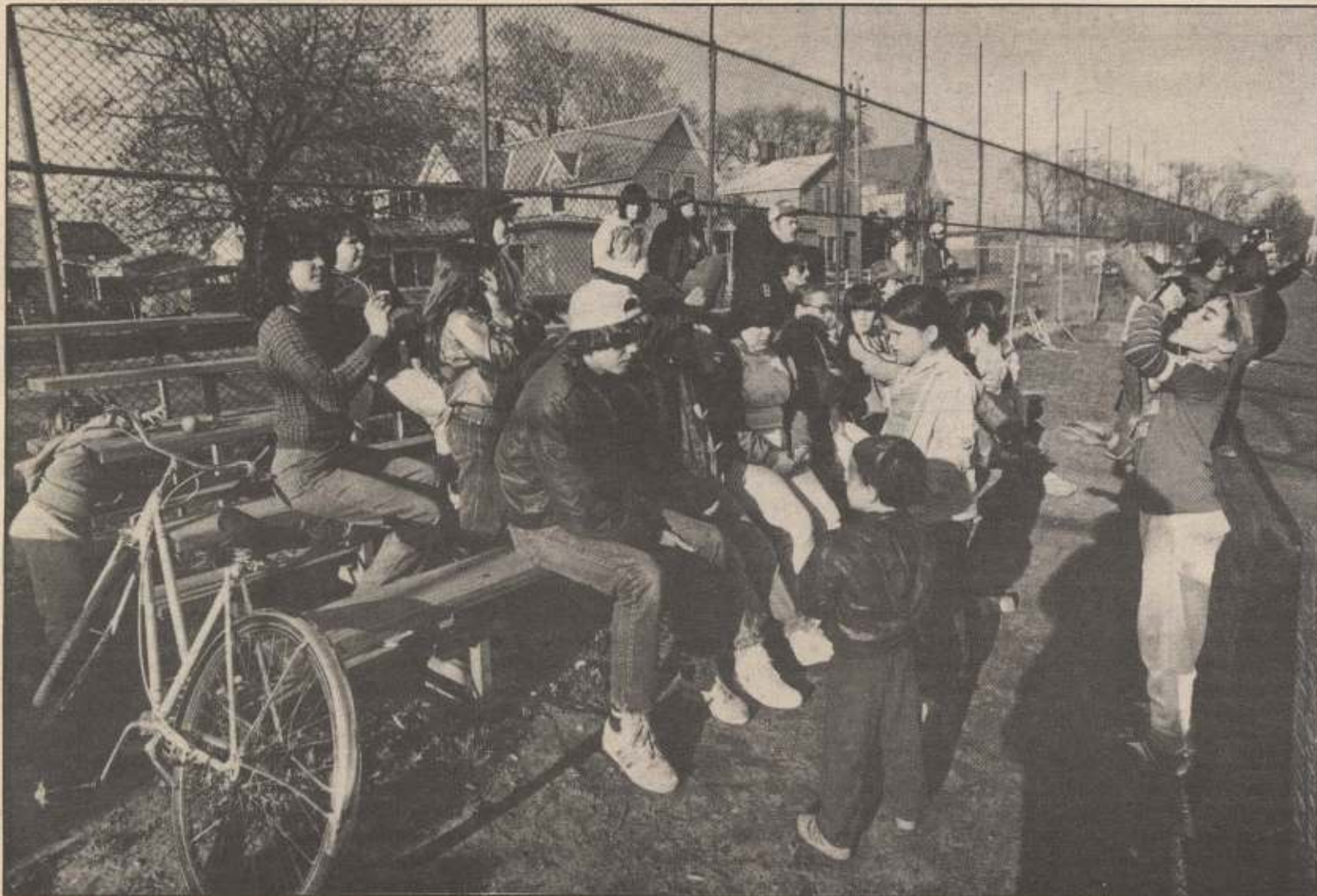
ca each May as the weather warms and the grass in the ball parks turns green.

For millions of children, spring requires certain ingredients — the roar of fans in the bleachers, the smell of glove leather, the sound of ball meeting bat.

But in Burlington's Old North End, the Little League mystique is relatively new.

Only four years ago, the

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Above, Parents and friends gather to watch the Old North End's Padres and Braves in any early season game.

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neighborhood lacked a league. Children who wanted to play ball had to travel to the New North End or the South End. For many underprivileged families in the city's poorest area, baseball was not an option.

In the spring of 1982, a process began that brought Little League to the Old North End. Volunteers set up a half-dozen teams. They gathered together players, coaches, uniforms and equipment.

Now the league is thriving. Some children cannot imagine a spring without ball at Roosevelt Park.

On weekday afternoons, 30 or 40 neighborhood residents take to the bleachers to cheer the teams on. Others park their cars and sit on the hoods, monitoring the games through the wire-mesh fence. Bicyclists pause on the sidewalk to stare.

This is not major Little League, the coaches admit. The style is unpolished; the language gets rough at times. ("Put it right out there, Travis," one girl yelled as a Braves player went up to bat. "If he hits you, I'll deck him.")

Mary Rogers of Northgate Road sat wrapped in a sweater in the 55-degree chill, rooting for her son, 12-year-old Braves player Abe Rogers. She comes to the park for every Braves game, she said. "It does some-

thing constructive with their time. They all want to win, but we try to push playing, not winning. And the uniforms help."

The uniforms are a key element of the league, organizers agree. The Braves sport bright red shirts and white pants that grow steadily dirtier as the game progresses. The Padres exude a more avant-garde air in yellow-gold shirts and stylish black pants.

The six-inning games can drag on until dusk, as children debate plays and scramble for the ball.

The teams depend, not on watches, but on the city street-light system. One street light on Walnut Street goes on before the others surrounding the little ball park. When the light flickers on, the game is done.

"Come on, street light," one woman pleaded as her son's team headed for defeat. But a friend pointed out that it was only 7 p.m., with no light in sight.

"What's the score?" someone asked.

"Fourteen to one." A Padres fan whistled forlornly.

In the old days, Burlington had only two Little Leagues. The line dividing them ran along North Street, cutting the Old North End in two. Many children's parents could not



Raymond Foy, on the fence, gets a bird's eye view of the game while fans Judy Sears and Glyn Nicholas watch from the bench.

drive them to games several times a week.

"A lot of them didn't play ball. They just hung out and got in trouble," said Michael Cassara of West Bolton, a league organizer.

Burlington Mayor Bernard Sanders began talking about a neighborhood league early in his first term, said Jane Driscoll, director of the mayor's Youth Office. "He was told by many, many people that it had been tried and failed, that people weren't going to stick with it and that the kids weren't interested."

The mayor arranged to have a poster printed and helped organize a meeting in the early spring of 1982, she said. About 90 kids showed up.

At the time, Steve Hamilton was driving his sons to the New North End games at Leddy Park.

Sanders called him one day to ask for help. Hamilton, a Germain Street resident, agreed to arrange a schedule and coach a team. He called Cassara to say, "Listen, I need an assistant coach." Sanders himself became a coach. The nucleus grew.

In that first year, teams included children from age 7 up to 13 or 14. That created camaraderie as older players helped the younger ones.

"We muddled our way through that first season," Cassara recalled. But neighborhood residents responded enthusiastically. They pitched in to construct dugouts at Roosevelt Park.

This season marks the first time the league has operated without ties to City Hall. It is now affiliated with the national Little League.

During the 1982 season, the city gave the league \$1,800 to help pay for uniforms, equipment and other costs. Now it gets \$1,500 a year in federal revenue-sharing funds, the same as the other leagues.

"We knew to get it started, we had to put in some extra money," said Sanders, who played baseball himself as a

boy in Brooklyn. "Now, it seems to be on its own feet."

The league's region was carved from the territory of the other two teams after lengthy negotiations with the coaches. It serves the neighborhood bounded by the Intervale to the north, Willard and Pearl streets to the east and south and Lake Champlain to the west.

Four teams are playing this year: the Padres, Braves, Dodgers and Reds. They include about 60 children, ages 8 to 12. Two dozen children in the 6-to-8 age group play "tee ball," a pitcher-less game in which players hit a ball off a stand.

The league has attracted a number of girl players and women coaches. "Some of the girls playing for us have been outshining some of the boys," said Kenneth Sachs of Burlington, a league organizer.

Players began selling raffle tickets last year, raising \$800. A new raffle drive began this month, and the winning ticket will be drawn at a June 16 home game of the Vermont Reds, the city's professional Class AA baseball team. The first prize is a season ticket to the Reds' games.

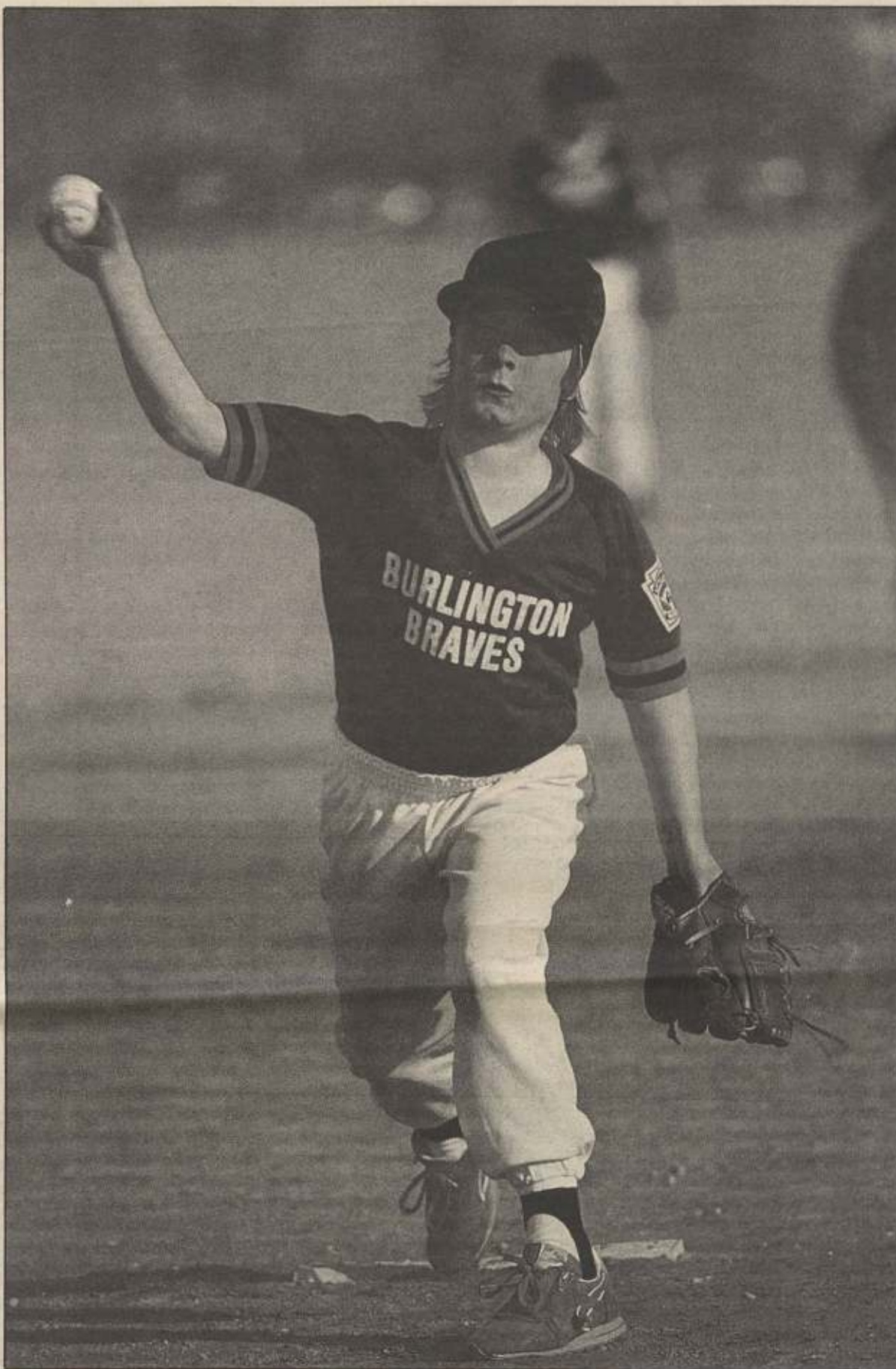
Sanders still stops by Roosevelt Park several times a year. He strolled in May 8 as the teams warmed up, pausing to talk to the children.

Coaches gathered to tell him the field still has problems. It needs base lines and trash cans, and the clay soil needs to be tempered with sandy soil, they said.

A Braves coach knelt to carve the ground with a pocket knife. "You could cut that, bake it — and you'd have a pot," he said.

Coaches and parents said the league can be credited for keeping some children "out of trouble."

The activities bring the children and their families closer together, said Bernie Cummings, executive director of the Burlington Boys Club at 62 Oak St., across the street from



Troy Siple prepares to burn one past a batter.

Roosevelt Park. "Families come to watch the games. The kids do their best because their mother and father are watching," he said.

"For a lot of kids, it gives a sense of purpose," added Hamilton, now a Burlington school commissioner. He credits the league with fostering a sense of community outside school. "My kids come home and talk about what happened at the game last night."

Like others, he has seen the league change as it grew. "Three years ago, we didn't

have benches. It was really hard to have them sit still by the fence. . . .

"Now, we not only have benches, but you get to see 11 kids sitting still, watching the game."

What's the score?" "Fourteen to one."

Erica Foy, 10, reached for the bat, her blond hair trailing under a blue Braves hat.

"Come on, Erica — show them how it's done!" a woman

shouted. "Swing with all your might. That's it!"

Erica ran for first base, her fans urging her on. She quickly glanced around her, moved on to second and started for third, the hat flying off her hair.

"Go back, Erica," someone yelled as the Padres tossed the ball perilously close to the third baseman. She swung around and headed back to second base to retrieve her hat and wait.

"What's the score?" "Seventeen to two." Travis Hoffman, 8, hit a

home run and slid home. He stopped by the bleachers and showed his mother the long, muddy streak on his white pants. "I noticed," she said, dryly.

Joyce Hoffman, of Pomeroy Street, said that her son is caught up in the league. "He lives baseball, morning, noon, and night. Takes after his mother."

Travis came by again, pressing a chunk of ice to his eye. He was playing third base when he collided with a ball, he explained. A friend interrupted to give him pointers about his batting style.

Steven Charles Sawyer, 4, was one of the youngest fans in the bleachers that day. He came with his uncle to watch the game; he plans to play for the league when he is older.

"What's the score?"

"Twenty-two to five."

"No, 24 to two."

The league lacks a scoreboard, so parents rely on their children to tell them the tallies. The reports that travel through the bleachers are inconsistent and often inaccurate. But no one seemed to care.

In the end, the Braves beat the Padres, 21-12. Players from the two teams lined up at home plate to shake one another's hands. The sun was setting behind the houses, casting golden streaks on the fast-emptying field.

Foy and Jimmy Murray, 10, walked across the grass, basking in victory. They both attend H.O. Wheeler School, where Little League is a major topic of conversation, they said.

They have seen the Vermont Reds play at Centennial Field, where games are very different than those played at Roosevelt Park.

"They pitch faster," Foy said. "They're bigger and better," Murray added.

The two walked on. Murray raised his arm in a salute and shouted to the empty stands, "We won. We whipped them!"

Behind him, a single street-light flickered on.