

Field of dreams

Opening day drawing near for Cunningham School's Hellman Field

By AMIE STEFFEN

Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO — They lined up in small groups, patiently waiting their turns to field a ground ball or take a swing off a tee in their school's gymnasium.

Coaches led them through the fundamentals of baseball Thursday. The elementary students practiced fielding and catching with their new gloves while wearing their new red T-shirts. Outside, a brand-new baseball field started to take shape.

A year ago, even six months ago, the students at Dr. Walter Cunningham School for Excellence wouldn't have guessed they'd be here, practicing their baseball and softball skills in preparation for playing on their very own baseball diamond.

Neither did Bob Hellman, whose family put up \$50,000 of the estimated \$150,000 for Cunningham School's Hellman Field, expected to open by May.

"When we get done with this ballpark, it will be the best one in the city, period," Hellman said Thursday, watching the 20-some boys and girls practice his favorite sport.

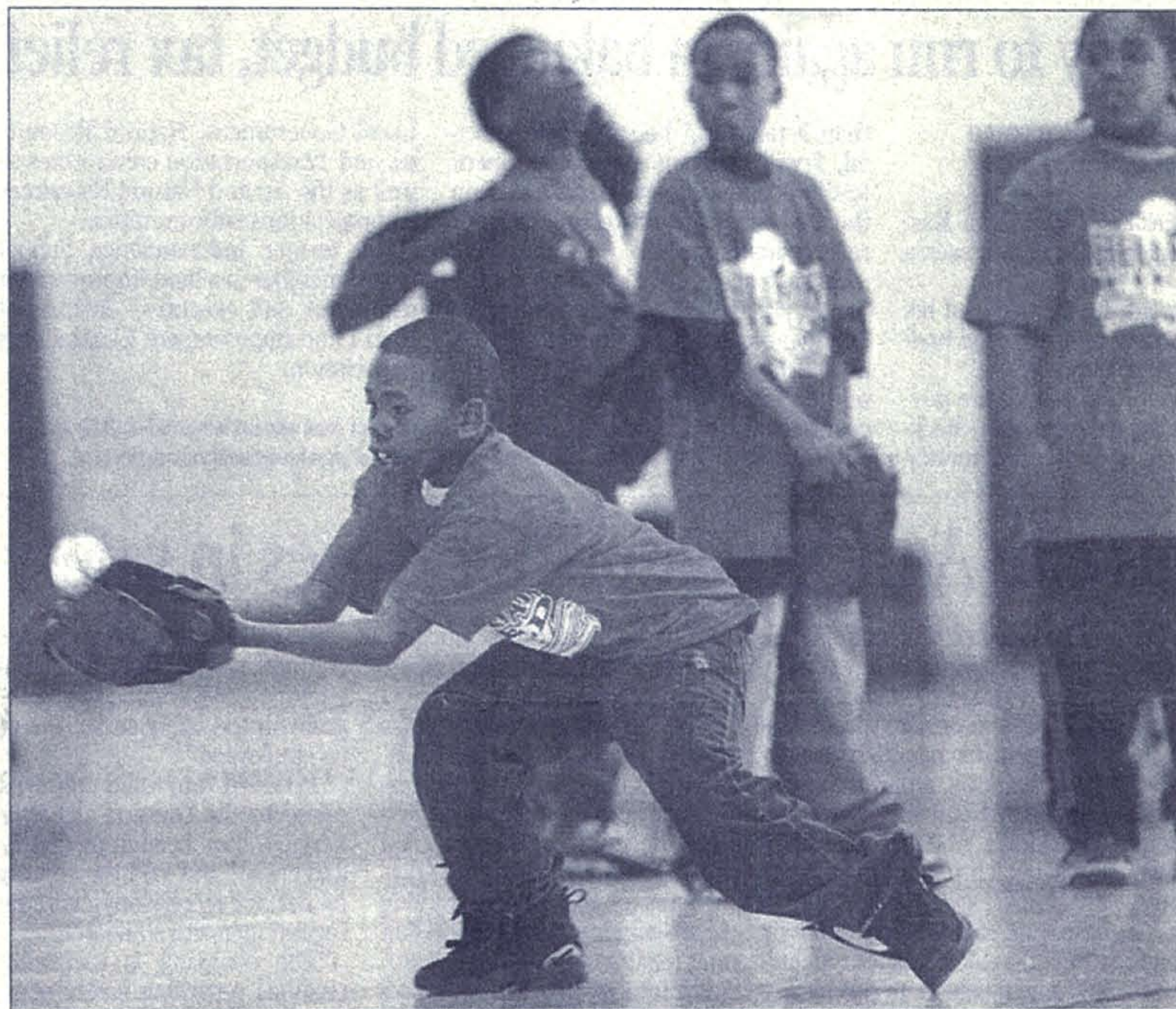
That's important to Hellman, who grew up 10 blocks from the elementary school on the east side of Waterloo. He recalled having to ride his bicycle to the west side just to play baseball as a child.

"As you get older, you begin to see — why aren't there ballparks around here?" Hellman said.

The idea for a new baseball field started when Hellman — a longtime Partner in Education with Cunningham School — asked Cunningham Principal Liz Crowley what the school could use. Crowley reportedly listed numerous items, including art supplies and other donations. But at the end of the list was something surprising.

"On that list was, 'Build a ballpark,'" Hellman said. "Probably Liz just threw that in there, thinking it would be a throwaway."

Hellman, who owns the marketing and advertising agency



Photos by MATTHEW PUTNEY /
Courier Staff Photographer

At left, Shareef Sallis dives for the ball on a pop fly drill at a Waterloo Leisure Services baseball clinic at Dr. Walter Cunningham School for Excellence Thursday. Below, Waterloo advertising executive Bob Hellman, who made a major donation toward a new baseball field near the school, signs Tru Robinson's glove during a baseball clinic at the school Thursday.

Hellman Associates in Waterloo, wondered if it could be done. He talked to people at his company. He talked to his family. He talked to the Waterloo school board.

With the school board donating the land, the Waterloo Leisure Services and area businesses donating equipment and the R.J. McElroy Trust donating funds to hold this week's spring break baseball clinic for students, Hellman and his family agreed to put up a substantial portion of the money and raise funding for the rest.

"We made a promise to ourselves: We're going to do it first class. We're not going to cut corners," he said.

He's not kidding. When completed, the Little League-sized ball park will have bleachers, dugouts, an electronic scoreboard and lights. Women's softball games and Little League games, including the Optimist

League in which Cunningham students will compete, will be played at Hellman Field.

Fourth-grader Tyriq O'Neal, like many of the other students at the clinic, never played in a baseball league before. Wearing his red Hellman Field t-shirt and practicing sprints, however, gets him amped up to play come May.

"You're getting a good education of the game," O'Neal said of the clinic. "You're doing a lot better at things you usually can't do."

For Hellman, getting kids excited about the game of baseball makes it all worth it.

"This was just a big chunk of land with sand burrs on it," he said. "Let's do something with it."

Contact Amie Steffen at (319) 291-1464 or amie.steffen@wcfcourier.com.

