

## Australia's entry into Little League Baseball World Series in 2016 does nation proud after creating history



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- by Elizabeth Cage
- Source: FOX SPORTS

WILLIAMSPORT, USA — The tension in the stadium is electric.

The Australian team is down two-to-nothing and has only one inning left. The boys are playing well but haven't gotten a run across against the strong Panamanian team. Star player Clayton Campbell is on base when Brent Iredale walks toward the plate.

The team and their supporters have travelled 16,000 kilometres to be here. The flags are flying, Iredale's sister clutches an inflated boxing kangaroo. One last "Aussie Aussie Aussie" and Iredale takes his spot.

Back home it's the middle of a late winter's night but friends, family, and hardcore baseball fans are tuned into ESPN to see what will happen.

A cracking ping of baseball leather off of an aluminium bat fills the nervous air and hopeful Australian eyes follow that ball right out of the stadium. The crowd explodes with joy. But the emotion is too much for the home run hitter's sister and she is soon in tears.

She is maybe seven. Her brother, the hero of the moment, 13.

This is the Little League Baseball World Series.



Australia's Clayton Campbell from Hills Little League bats against the Europe-Africa Team from Italy.

Source: Getty Images

Each year sixteen teams — eight representing regions of the United States and eight from international qualifying tournaments — gather to crown a champion.

These aren't national teams but community teams. Brent, Clayton, and the 12 other Australian boys all play in the Hills Little League from suburban Sydney. They've been playing with or against one another since they were five or six.

One of those kids is Harrison Wheeldon, a year-six student at Rouse Hill Anglican. At 11 he is the youngest of the Australian players. His father Brett remembers finding his then-seven-year old son watching the first Australian team at the Little League World Series on ESPN. "How do I get there?" he asked. "I said I didn't know but if he worked hard maybe someday he would, so for him this really is a dream come true."

Australians have been playing baseball since the 19th century. Junior baseball leagues have existed all around the country for a very long time but the Little League brand only arrived in 2007. A major appeal of the brand is the chance — however slim — of coming here to the World Series.

Australian baseball clubs embraced Little League in huge numbers and by 2012, with 400 leagues in operation, Australia had greater participation than any country in the world outside of North America. In recognition of that achievement Little League International granted the country their own automatic berth in the annual World Series.



Clayton Campbell pitches against the Europe-Africa Team from Italy.

Source: Getty Images

Williamsport is a small, pretty, city nestled in the rolling hills of the Susquehanna River Valley. It feels a lot like the all-American town of TV shows and movies. There are kids riding bicycles on tree lined streets, but pick-up trucks and SUVs dominate the roads. The approach to the stadium complex is dominated by a giant American flag waving slowly against a summer sky, a ribbon of black-topped highway, and the Golden Arches of McDonalds.

The Little League World Series complex itself, is as one parent described it, “the Disneyland of baseball”. Here boys (and sometimes girls — but none this year) are the superstars. They sign autographs and have photos taken with fans. They live in a special compound just for the players and coaches. Their playing ability is dissected, kindly, by ESPN commentators who spend the rest of the summer in Major League Baseball stadiums.

The fields the teams play on could be mistaken for the real thing. They are meticulously groomed with perfect reddy-brown infield dirt, lush green grass, and padded outfield fences. The stadium seating fills up for every game. These are fans — not just friends and family — but baseball fans who have made the journey. For some this is a once-in-a-lifetime trip to tick this off their baseball bucket list, while for others it's an annual pilgrimage.





Stephen Courtney hits a home run in the top of the fifth inning against the Caribbean Team.

Source: Getty Images

The townspeople fully embrace these annual arrivals. A parade, imagine a slightly smaller version of the one for the AFL Grand Final, kicks off the 10-day tournament. "It was mind blowing," said mum Belinda Wheeldon, "We thought the kids would just walk down the street. But there were marching bands and the boys were all on the back of trucks being cheered for two hours by a crowd five and 10 people deep."

Dad Brett picks up the story, "some of our boys were in tears because it was just overwhelming. The baseball is unreal but the experience is something they'll remember all of their lives."

Brent Iredale will certainly remember that home run for the rest of his life, even though the team went on to lose the game. Asked how he felt about hitting a two-run home run in the Little League World Series he answered with all the purity you could hope for from a 13-year-old, "It was great. It was amazing. I can't believe it happened."

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Clayton Campbell prepares to pitch against the Europe-Africa Team from Italy.

Source: Getty Images

Hills Little League became the first Australian team to win their first game at the World Series and the first Australian team to win two games in a World Series.

They made it into the final eight teams, with the other three international teams coming from country's with much longer Little League histories: Korea, Panama and Mexico.

In their first game they defeated Europe-Africa (Emilia, Italy) 3-1

In their second game they lost to Latin America (Aguadulce, Panama) 3-2

In their third game they defeated the Caribbean (Williamsted, Curacao) 2-1

And in their final game they lost to Mexico (San Nicholas) 10-0

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