

From the

FIELD

to the

FUTU



*How RBI softball is shaping the next generation
of young women in Macon*

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As she stepped back onto the field for this photoshoot with Matt Odom, Franchesca Divert could hardly contain her smile. But it was not just because she was being asked to pose for the camera. She was a little reserved at first, since it was our first time meeting, but it did not take long for her excitement to break through.

“I wish I brought my shoes and some extra clothes to play,” she told me as she watched a group of girls on the field practicing softball at the Tom Fontaine Complex.

Just a year ago, Divert was one of them, preparing for the summer season and spending countless afternoons and evenings on that same turf.

Divert first stepped onto that field in eighth grade. Not long after, serious knee injuries forced her to sit out much of her freshman and sophomore years of high school. Multiple surgeries and months of

physical therapy followed, testing her patience and determination.

But quitting was never really an option.

She was determined to get back on that field.

Franchesca typically played third base, a position many consider one of the most demanding spots on the team.

“I enjoy every second of it. I love when the ball comes flying at me. I love the adrenaline rush. I love the risk. I love the responsibility that comes with playing that position,” she said. “I was also just as happy when other teammates got to play third base, too. That was my favorite spot, so if somebody else got the chance, I was excited for them.”

She was happy for her teammates — because to her, they were more than just teammates.

“I feel like every softball team is different, but I feel like every single one is a family because you genuinely have to work as a team on the field to get

RIGHT
Maliyha
Simmons takes
the field.

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where you need to be,” Divert said.

Divert’s team was one of four softball teams participating in Macon’s Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI) program. For more than a decade, RBI Macon has been opening doors for hundreds of young athletes, giving girls and boys the opportunity to play baseball and softball while learning lessons that extend far beyond the game.

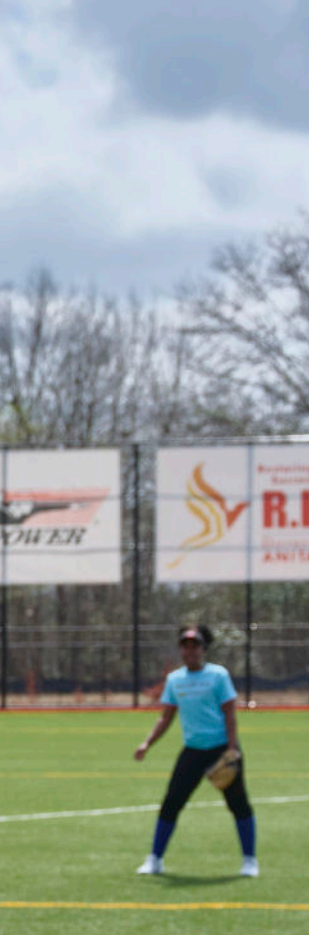
At its core, RBI is about removing barriers. It does not matter where a child comes from or whether their family can afford the sport. What matters is their willingness to show up, work hard,

and be part of a team.

Through RBI Macon, the game becomes more than just baseball or softball. It becomes a place where young people learn discipline, resilience, and confidence while building friendships that often last long after the final inning.

In addition to the four softball teams, RBI Macon also has four baseball teams.

“When we started, my goal was simple: give kids something positive to do in the summer and an opportunity to play baseball or softball,” said RBI Macon founder Jeff Battcher. “If a kid couldn’t pay the



\$25 registration fee, it didn't matter. We took care of it."

Each team is intentionally diverse. Franchesca attends the Academy for Classical Education (ACE), but many of her teammates came from schools across Middle Georgia.

Bringing girls together from different communities is a key part of the program's mission, according to Battcher and the softball director, Coach Bernard Snell.

"I believe in diversity, so I like bringing girls in from all backgrounds," said Snell. "That's what we try to do. But we especially want to motivate and create opportunities for girls in the inner city."

Snell says building teams this way allows players to learn from one another. By sharing the field with teammates from different schools, neighborhoods, and life experiences, the girls gain a deeper understanding of each other and the value of working together.

"I still keep in touch with a lot of them, actually," said Divert. "We all came from different schools, but kind of the same area. So, when I'd play softball,

"It's been fun meeting new people, meeting challenges, and just having fun playing as a team, and making new friends."



basketball, or run track for school, I'd still see them at basketball games or at track meets. Even though we were on different teams, afterward we'd always go hang out, say hey, and catch up."

Divert said she did not fully realize it at the time, but she sees clearly now that playing on the RBI softball team was teaching her lessons off the field.

Lessons about perseverance. About teamwork. About supporting others even when you are competing for the same position.

Lessons that players like Maliyha Simmons are learning right now.

Maliyha is a senior at Central High School who, like Franchesca, has been playing softball most of her life.

"It's been fun meeting new people, meeting challenges, and just having fun playing as a team," said Simmons. "And making new friends."

Macon RBI also gives players opportunities to travel across the state and the southeastern region. For some players, these trips are their first time leaving Macon.

"Some of those kids had never been on an airplane before in their lives," said Battcher. "They're learning how to order food in a restaurant, how to handle

ABOVE RIGHT
Coaches like Bernard Snell help RBI players succeed.

LEFT RBI softball players practice on Anthony Road.



MACON RBI BY THE NUMBERS

Behind the scenes, running the Macon RBI program takes significant coordination, community support, and resources each year.

The program provides uniforms, equipment, field access, coaching, and tournament opportunities for young athletes across Macon-Bibb County. In order to keep participation accessible to families, much of the cost is covered through sponsorships, donations, and volunteer support.

According to program leaders, it takes about \$150,000 each year to operate the Macon RBI program locally. That funding helps cover everything from equipment and uniforms to travel and tournament play, allowing young athletes to compete and grow through the game.

Community support plays a major role in making the program possible.

How the community can help

People interested in supporting Macon RBI can do so in several ways:

- Make a financial donation to support equipment, uniforms, and travel
- Volunteer as a coach or mentor
- Help connect the program with local sponsors or partners

Every contribution helps ensure that young athletes in Macon have the opportunity to step onto the field, develop their skills, and be part of something bigger than the game. To learn more, visit MaconRBI.org.



ABOVE Franchesca Divert earned a scholarship from the program.

BELOW The rigorous athletic program builds character and opens up opportunity.

“RBI was very supportive in growing my daughter as an individual, not just on the field, but in who she was and how she presented herself.”

money, how to travel. Those life experiences are just as important as the baseball.”

Macon RBI was founded on the belief that every child deserves the chance to play, regardless of where they come from or what they can afford. As the cost of youth sports continues to rise, programs like RBI work intentionally to remove those barriers.

Registration fees are kept low, equipment is provided, and travel expenses are often covered so players can compete in tournaments they might not otherwise have access to.

What started as an effort to simply give kids something positive to do during the summer has grown into something much bigger.

“That’s what this program is really about — those life-changing experiences,” said Battcher.

For Franchesca, those experiences helped shape her future. They taught her confidence, but also opened the door for opportunity.

Out of more than 300 Nike RBI baseball and softball programs serving over 100,000 young athletes nationwide, only six softball players earned a Major League Baseball

scholarship. Franchesca Divert from Macon is one of them. She earned a \$20,000 scholarship that she is now using towards her nursing degree at Georgia Southwestern University.

While she’s not currently playing on a softball team in order to focus on her first year of college, Divert said she’ll be back one day. For now, she’s enjoying watching the next group of girls take their turns in the batter’s box, and can see a little of herself in each of them.

Not every player who joins RBI will go on to earn a scholarship or play in college, but each one gets a chance to learn new skills.

Divert’s mother, Melissa Williams-Divert, believes that is exactly what made the program so special.

“RBI was very supportive in growing my daughter as an individual, not just on the field, but in who she was and how she presented herself,” Williams-Divert said. “She was in sort of a leadership position with some of the younger girls, and they really worked with her to be a better person and a better player.”

She says the coaches focused on more than just the mechanics of the game.

“When they had workouts and practice, they didn’t just talk about catching the ball and hitting the ball,” explained Williams-Divert. “They talked about attitude. They talked about how you showed up. They talked about timeliness, how to prepare yourself before games, and how to prepare yourself mentally whenever you’re in competition.”

Lessons that stay with players long after they leave the field.

