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A district like no other: District One is the best that Babe Ruth League baseball has to offer

07/13/2004

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Column by George O'Gorman -- Long before they dreamed up baseball gimmicks like Pool Play and Final Eight, there was Babe Ruth League.

After 52 years, the youth sports program founded right here in Yardville is still going strong -- and maybe getting better than ever.

Sunday's championship game of the District One Tournament for 15-year olds that attracted a big crowd to Hopewell Valley BRL's Bacon Field was proof.

Manager George Mattonelli's boys, who completed a five-game sweep of the district series with an 8-2 win over defending champ Hamilton in the title game, did what Nottingham teams at all ages have been doing for years -- play great defense, get superb pitching and hit with runners in scoring position.

While the 13-to-15-year-olds may not always get the same media hype they did when most of them were in Little League, it is obvious from their level of play why District One is the envy of the seven other districts that are in Southern New Jersey.

No district has as many teams, or players as talented, as the ones competing in District One.

That was evident by the quality of the first two teams eliminated from the 10-team tourney. Lawrence and Trenton were probably better than some teams who will be at Hamilton's Veterans Park on July 23-24 to participate in the Southern N.J. state tourney that Nottingham will host and Hamilton will play in as the District One entry.

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"Every league that plays in our District One tournaments wants to play here even though they all know some very good teams will never get out of the district," says commissioner John Vilella.

"Who knows how many teams from this district were talented enough to maybe win a state title but couldn't make it out of District One because we've got so many great teams here."

Not only great teams, but great facilities, too.

Now that the Hightstown/East Windsor BRL is able to use the fine East Windsor PAL Complex on Airport Road to host District One tournament play there are nine sites in the district with lights, parking and seating to host a major tournament.

Next summer three of them -- Hopewell, Hightstown/EW and Hamilton -- are talking of hosting Southern N.J. state playoffs. That's after three others put out the welcome mat for a District One series.

"Some other districts in South Jersey wonder why District One gets so many state tournaments, but all you have to do is look at the fields we have and the people who run our tournaments to get the answer," says Vilella.

Then there's the fact people in this district take their Babe Ruth baseball very seriously, provide superior facilities and give the media the best working conditions to promote the game.

With new Babe Ruth Leagues about to open in Bordentown and Allentown/Millstone, and both of them interested in joining the District One family, this district could get even bigger.

It won't because it's already the biggest, let alone the best, in the entire state -- maybe in all of the Middle Atlantic Region.

Officials at Babe Ruth League international headquarters on Brunswick Ave. in Lawrence feel it would be best if District One were split into two districts now. But with several current leagues claiming they'll leave Babe Ruth League if forced to go to another district that likely won't happen.

Which is great to hear.

International BRL officials still recall that two of the best World Series for 15-year olds ever were in Hamilton (2001) and Ewing (1993). Both set attendance marks that are still standing.

With talk of bringing a 13-year old World Series to Hamilton in two years and other area leagues discussing the possibility of hosting regional or national play within five years it's obvious Babe Ruth Baseball has never been stronger in the town where it was born than it is right now.

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One of the innovations Vilella came up with that has made the District One 15-year old tourney even more successful is to start an annual all-star game with the top players from the District One tourney against a 16-year old team from Mercer Senior BRL.

With the help of the Trenton Thunder this game is played at Waterfront Park each August. The 2004 edition will be held there on Sunday Aug. 9 at 9 a.m.

Boys from the recent District One 15-year old series who were selected are Hamilton's Matt Joiner, Jamie Benson, Ray Bokofsky and Hiram Cartegna, Nottingham's Mike Mattonelli, Brad Raynor, Brian Belza and Chris English, Ewing's

Kyle Elder and Dave Angebrannt, West Windsor-Plainsboro's Zack Weale, Kevin Maselli, Sean McNulty, Lawrence's Jason Zegarski and Christian Cox, Hopewell's Steve Giovacchini and Matt Lanouette, Princeton's Bryce Metro, Dan Etherton and Chris Fiorentini (out injured), Montgomery's Dave Mohns and John Engelmann, Hightstown's Curt Schickner and Taylor Smith and Trenton's Hector Colon and Jose Gonzalez.

Being selected to play in the District One All-Star Game at Waterfront Park is a goal for all the 15-year olds who compete in the local Babe Ruth tourney. In past years it amazingly changed the careers of a lot of young boys who didn't take their baseball all that serious until they got picked to play at the area's grandest baseball stage.

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Speaking of grand stages Mike Ryan and his staff at Hopewell Valley BRL deserve tremendous kudos for the work they did over the past two weeks in running one of the alltime best District One 15-year old tournaments.

His staff of dedicated workers included Doreen Ryan, Chuck Sista, Calvin Downs, Pat (50/50) Cortina, Kurt Peterson, Mark Martell and Jeff Giovacchini.

Blessed with good weather they got 19 games over a nine-day span off without a hitch.

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