

'Together all the time' at Sawnee

Small booster club connects community

By Alyssa LaRenzie
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If you ask Bill Moats, sometimes smaller is better. The Sawnee Mountain Park baseball and softball booster club, which includes about 300 youths, pales in comparison to organizations at some of the county's larger parks, Moats said — and he likes it that way.

"We get to know each other better," said Moats, who is the club's president. "I think we see new friendships formed just because we're small."

The west Forsyth park often sees the same families returning year after year.

"You know these kids from 5 years old," Moats said. "Now they're playing at 15 years old and they've grown up in this program."

As in many youth sports groups, parents largely run the program, which began when the park opened about 14 years ago.

Moats estimated that those most involved spend well more than 1,500 hours per year volunteering to help the children play ball.

That's plenty of time to get comfortable merging individual families into a bigger

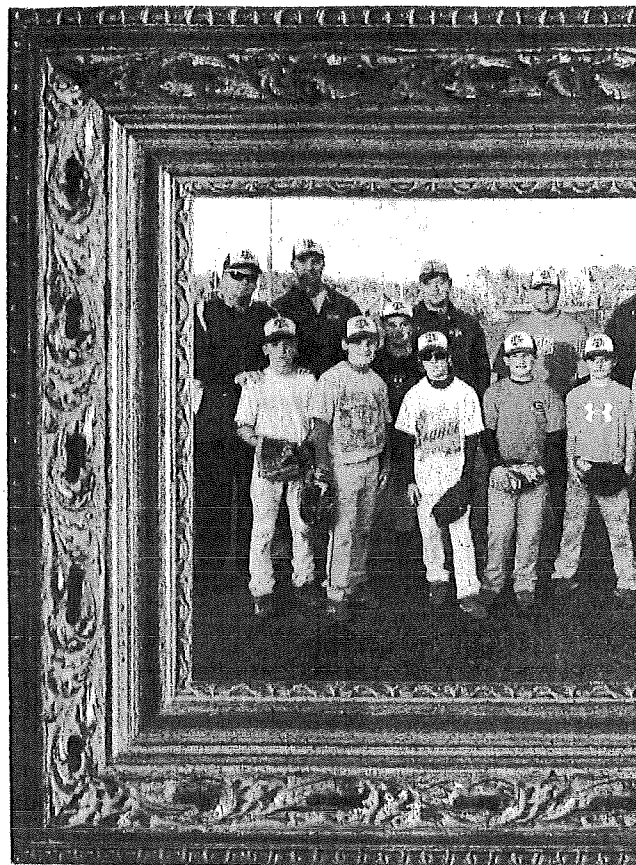
baseball family.

Coach Jon Howard said he and co-coach Kerry Burns have grown really close.

"Me and Kerry didn't know each other until ball," Howard said. "Now we've been [coaching] together going on four years. Our kids are together all the time."

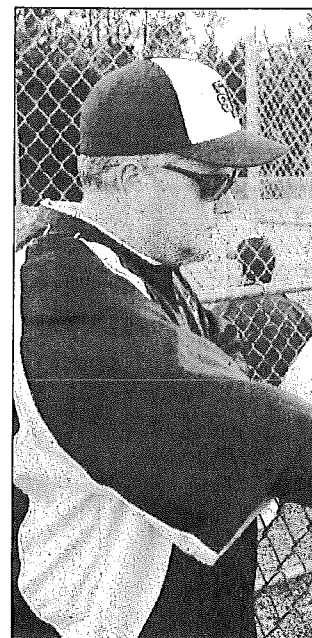
"Has there been a week in four years we probably ain't seen each other? No."

Their sons play together on the 10-year-old travel team. Like many of the boys in the program, they have spent years on the same teams.



Coaches and baseball Mountain Park assoc The parks baseball ar kept a family feel si ago, coaches say.

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Baseball coach Jon How McBrayer during a prac Park. Left, Howard and talk with players before p

Play: 'Realize it's a community'

Howard said he's grown attached to the boys, looking at them "as his own."

That same connection, he said, can be seen among the teammates.

"These boys has been together for three years now and our little team ... is so tight-knit that it would be one of those cases where if you mess with one of them, you mess with all of them."

Teams tend to form bonds quickly at Sawnee Mountain, which softball coach Tena Wheeler attributed largely to the close-knit feel of the area near the park.

Wheeler recalled one of the 5-year-old girls she coached last year coming in so nervous.

"Then she saw kids she recognized from school, which made it all better," Wheeler said. "They realize it's a community."

For children who don't attend the same schools, baseball brings them back together in the spring, Chad Snidow said.

For those who choose to play recreationally rather than the more competitive travel baseball, the same group of kids often returns to the same team, said Snidow, who coaches a rec team.

It's the sport his family most looks forward to each year, he said.

"Some of my fondest memories growing up as a kid are baseball," Snidow said. "Our kids will be the same."

Howard, a county native, said he can still remember playing baseball as a child.

The way it's run has changed a lot since then, he said, but he knows now that those little things about coaching can really stick with the children.

"We try to, before the games, do a little baseball story and tie it in to something that they're going to have to deal with later in life," Howard said.

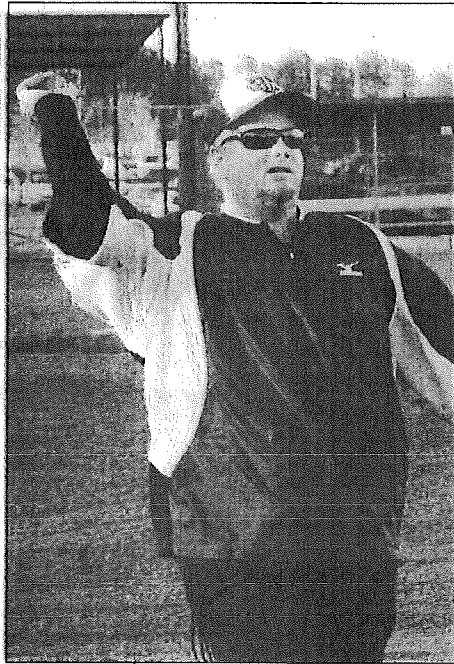
"It probably seems stupid to them now, but maybe one day it'll make an impression."

Moats said plenty of the coaches hold more than one role, sometimes adding mom, dad, counselor or mentor to their job in the eyes of a child.

The coaches agreed that parents will also come to them to ask for help in getting through to their children about school or other issues.

Those bonds can run deep, Moats added, recalling the end of his coaching season last year as the teens headed to high school.

"We were all sitting there boo-hoo-



Jon Howard, a baseball coach at Sawnee Mountain Park, throws a ball to an outfielder during practice.

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Jon Howard
Coach, Sawnee Mountain Park

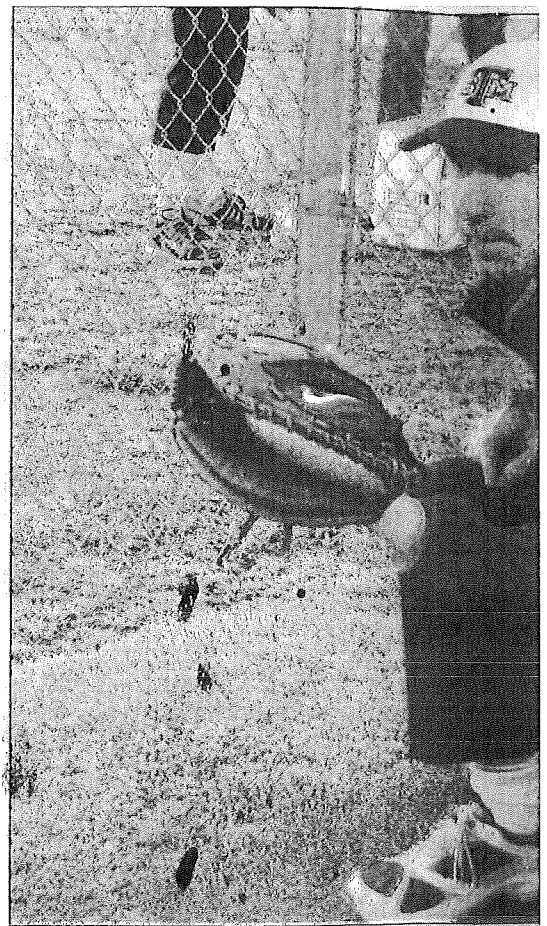
ing, crying and hugging because that was it," he said. "That was an extremely emotional time because our baseball life together had come to an end."

Outside of ball, he said, the group has remained close.


Though Moats no longer has a child in the program, he said he loves the club too much to leave.

"For all of us, whether you're coaching or on the board, it's about being able to give back to the community and give back to the kids," he said.

"It's the giving back. It's the relationships. I would be absolutely lost without it."



Sawnee Mountain Park baseball coach Keith ... pitches during a recent practice.




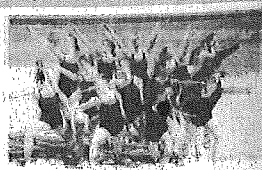
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