

WHY AMERICAN LEGION BASEBALL?

September 18, 2014 – 02:55 PM

Kevin Manero - The Case for American Legion Baseball

Coach Kevin Manero is an American Legion coach. He is a former high school and Division I pitcher at LaSalle University and is a tremendous baseball guy. Although the team and player names are specific to the suburban Philadelphia area, I think the theme and message from his piece are universal to baseball in America today. He makes a very compelling argument in support of players participating in American Legion Baseball instead of AAU/Travel Baseball.

PAY TO PLAY - THE FINANCES AND THE PROMISES:



Coach Manero

Over the last approximately ten years, the concept of AAU baseball, otherwise referred to as Travel Ball or Tournament and Showcase teams, has increased in popularity and diverted many high school age baseball players away from the established, community based American Legion programs. As I enter my ninth season as an American Legion coach with an admitted bias, I continue to see many families spend inordinate amounts of money on these nouveaux programs, and I feel it is time to speak as a voice for Legion baseball. I am certainly not denouncing all tournament and travel teams (there are always exceptions to every point one may make for or against), and I am also not promulgating praise for every American Legion program, as certainly some need fixing and Legion

ball itself is not without its own shortcomings, but before people jump into what may be packaged as a better baseball alternative, there are some points that should be considered and some questions that should be further examined.

How much money are you spending on "furthering your son's baseball career?"

Who are you listening to for baseball advice?

What are your kids really learning, and how much are they really progressing?

It's time to start thinking about these questions a little more diligently in this era of "pay to play" youth baseball. In so many ways, it appears that parents and their sons now feel they should measure the quality of a baseball program on how much it costs to join it. But, does it make sense to pay at least a \$2,000 registration fee (sometimes much more) and then dish out more money on top of that for transportation and hotels, only to end up at a college where your counterparts on American Legion teams also landed, after paying much less to get to that point?

Also consider this: In the last six years, four players from the Hatfield and Nor-Gwyn Legion programs have advanced to play professional baseball, and over forty have gone on to play in college. (And that is just 2 of the 4,000 programs in the nation and nearly 400 in PA. These numbers may not mean much at first but consider these facts available at www.ncaa.org:

* Only 6.3% of high school baseball players go on to play NCAA baseball

* Only 0.44% of high school baseball players will be signed by a pro team.

When you consider these meager percentages, it is clear that two of our most prominent local Legion baseball programs are doing a pretty good job of turning out players who advance beyond their percentage likelihood to the next level (and that is only mentioning two programs). Oh, and by the way - these players' parents are not spending thousands of dollars to allow that to happen; instead, they are saving that money for college since most NCAA baseball teams have only limited scholarship money, and it is rare that a player would get a "full ride" despite what some disillusioned would-be collegiate stars may boast to their peers. Here is a brief glimpse at local Legion players who have advanced to play Division I ball in recent years:

(*Doylestown Legion* – **John Gyles**, LaSalle; **David Putman**, Duke; **Ryan Pater**, St. Joe's; *Nor-Gwyn Hawks* – **Mike Bradstreet**, Rhode Island; **Matt Quinn**, Maryland; **Ryan Ignas**, Penn State; *Hatfield Legion* – **Eric Ruth**, Winthrop; **Kevin Christy**, LaSalle; *Pennridge Legion* – **Eric and Adam Kammler**, LaSalle; **Pat Dameron**, Delaware.) To finish the list of local Division One players in just the last few seasons and to add the prominent

D-2 and D-3 programs to which our local legion players have advanced would far exceed the available space for this article (such as Boyertown Bears Legion alum **Shayne Houck** who lit the PSAC on fire last year, batting .449 with 17HR and 77 RBI for Kutztown).

THE EXPERIENCE

If your son is playing an AAU sponsored tournament with a name like the "Elite National Championship" but you had to pay a boat load of money for the team to be there - are they really playing for a national championship? Or are they just a team that has enough money to pay to enter the tournament with an impressive name?

It is worth noting that the American Legion programs in Spring City, Norchester, Boyertown, Pennridge, Hatfield and Nor-Gwyn have, in the last six years and beyond, advanced to Regional, State, and National Tournaments on multiple occasions, and yes... they **ADVANCED** - that means they had to win a lot of baseball games to earn the right to compete for these tournament titles, after all, generally that is how it works in college and the pros as well. And when they did **ADVANCE**, how much money did they have to pay to play in these tournaments comprised of some of the best legion teams in the state and nation... \$0.00. In fact, when the Nor-Gwyn Hawks advanced to the Great Lakes Regional in Appleton, WI in the summer of 2009, (and when Pennridge Legion advanced to Mattoon, IL last summer summer) not only was it free, but American Legion baseball picked up the tab for the round trip flight, rental cars, and four nights in the hotel., AND all players and coaches received meal money each day. And yet some families are paying thousands to play in tournaments in which they have to pay for their own transportation and hotels, but those are the tournaments that are titles "Elite."

So, if Legion ball in our area has so much to offer, what is pulling families into the realm of AAU tournament ball instead? A lot of it has to do with the myth that a player has to play in AAU Tournaments and showcases to "be seen." Sure, there are very talented players who have been seen by and signed by college coaches at tournaments; however, do people ever realize, "yes, but these players are good players anyway, and they would likely have gone on to college ball with or without an AAU team"? Many tournament teams have spawned when talented kids leave an established program, set up tournament teams full of good players, and then a year or two later... disappear to be replaced by another temporary team somewhere else. I fully understand the need for our kids to be on good teams that provide good baseball experiences. After all, who wouldn't want only the best for his or her own son, but perhaps maybe if the good players would stick around for the commitment of community based teams, and

the focus would be on getting good people involved to run these teams, and continue to build them, then we would not even need teams with registration fees of over \$2,000+ for a season, and those who really cannot afford that would not feel so much pressure to spend it anyway.

THE ATMOSPHERE AND THE ESTABLISHMENT

Pennsylvania's nearly 400 American Legion teams ranks it tops in the country in total number of teams, and Region 2 in PA (Berks, Bucks, Montgomery, Lehigh, Northampton, and Schuylkill Counties) has been home to the PA State Champion eight times in the last ten years, including Hatfield in 2002 and Nor-Gwyn in 2005, <http://www.baseball.legion.org/baseball> . Along the road to that success, it is difficult to top the baseball atmosphere one would find at Bear Stadium in Boyertown on a typical summer night (www.bearstadium.com), or more locally at our own Hosteley Field at Nor-Gwyn on a night when the Hawks are in town (www.nor-gwynbaseball.org). The community involvement, the behind the scenes volunteerism, the media attention on the front page of the sports section on a daily basis, the constant phone calls and emails to and from college coaches, the affordable registration fees, and the opportunity to advance to League, Regional, State, and National play in front of numerous coaches and scouts, are what combine to make American Legion baseball such a beneficial program of which to be a part. And to the question of exposure for players well, the list (as previously referenced) is lengthy and getting longer each year.

WHICH BRAND OF BASEBALL IS REALLY PREPARING YOUNG PLAYERS MOST EFFECTIVELY?

An NCAA season is a day in and day out grind of 56 nine inning games on a nearly daily basis, usually with conference games on the weekends and days of practice in between. A major league season is a 162 game grind with nine innings each day. These college and pro seasons are marathons of ups and downs, with standings, jockeying for positioning, league and non-league opponents, strong and weak opponents, home field advantage and away games. Preparation for this type of season happens in American Legion baseball. Teams are vying for postseason berths, coaches are playing non-league games to keep people fresh and give regular players a break, and players are learning to handle and adapt to the high and low moments in a rigorous, but regimented schedule of daily baseball. AAU /Tournament ball is run entirely differently. In many cases these teams play weekend tournaments often requiring extensive travel arrangements, only to be idle most of the week, before packing up and heading to another tournament the following weekend. Without daily

conditioning regimens such as pitchers running and long tossing between starts, without league play, and with the focus being on just winning these short sprints of weekend tournaments that often include multiple doubleheaders and upwards of 4-6 games in one weekend, the baseball being played in the AAU/ Tournament programs is not conducive to preparing players for the competition and the rigors of the next level. Not to mention, these teams lack the media publicity, the community involvement, and the affordability that American Legion baseball offers. After all, just because it costs more money does not mean it is a better final product. Further insights are also available at the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rD4GSEYDeZc>

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FINAL THOUGHTS

So, if your son is going to be in high school soon or already is, ask yourself if you want to be spending upwards of over \$15,000 between summer and fall baseball for about three years worth of youth baseball.

Sure, tuck some money away for private instruction - our area is brimming with indoor instructional facilities, and one-on-one private lessons can absolutely make better players. But save the rest of your money to cover what a partial baseball scholarship may not, and remember, the players in our area who have been drafted and signed at the pro level, still make up only 0.44% of high school players, so be optimistic but also be realistic. And if you are a player with high aspirations for baseball, and want to play at the next level ... get better. Set up a batting tee in your basement or backyard and take fifty swings a day. Get out and long toss as much as you can while the weather is warm, and have someone hit you a hundred ground balls a week; get into the weight room; watch baseball games on TV and learn situational baseball, not just ESPN highlights. Oh, and by the way...that advice is free.