

WITH EMPHASIS ON FUN

Tee-Ball Introduces Youngsters To National Pasttime



SUNDROP COACH Phil Wemyss offers a few words of advice to five-year-old Al Bulak as the youngster steps up to the plate. Tee-ball is open to boys and girls ages five to seven, giving Al and others just starting out in the game three years of practice before having to face a pitcher in the minor leagues.



GERALD LEGGETT fixes his eyes firmly on the ball as he takes a turn in the batter's box during the tee-ball season finale last Friday in Shallotte. One thing coaches try to teach their players about batting is to watch the bat hit the ball, and it appears Gerald learned his lesson well.

BY DOUG RUTTER
Long after his teammates had charged off the field and into the dugout to wait their turn at bat, Ty DeHart was still crouched in the middle of the baseball diamond. He was digging a hole in the vicinity of second base and didn't look up to realize that he was all alone on the field until parents and coaches shouted his name from the sidelines.

As the early evening air filled with the sound of applause mixed with laughter, Ty stood up, and with the weight of his oversized glove pulling at his shoulder, came running off the field as fast as his short legs would carry him. All the time, he sported a devilish look of enjoyment on his slightly dirty face.

The setting was a tee-ball game last week in Shallotte, but a scene undoubtedly replayed dozens of times each night across the country as youngsters get their first taste of the national pastime.

Homer Andrews, president of Shallotte Babe Ruth League, said the purpose of tee-ball is "to get the kids started early in the fundamentals of baseball."

Those fundamentals include the ob-



TY DEHART of the Blue Jays looks on as his teammates make a defensive play during a game last week against Sundrop. In addition to the catcher's face mask, throat protector and batting helmets, tee-ball employs a spongy, lightweight "safety" baseball to reduce the chances of injury.

"I have more fun than the kids do. I really do."

—Don Britt
Tee-ball coach

vious ones such as batting, throwing and catching, as well as a few characteristics the volunteer coaches try to instill in their players: always giving 100 percent; being a good sport no matter what the outcome.

"We try to encourage sportsmanship and fun and just let the kids play," said Andrews. "I think it's a great program if for nothing else than getting the kids to play together."

But the program also acts as a stepping stone, introducing children to the game of baseball and leading them to the local youth minor leagues and eventually the major league and high school ballfields.

"It's a progressing thing all the way through. From that tee-ball they progress into our minor leagues," said Andrews, where the competition is better and players face a pitcher for the first time.

After two years at that stage, the ball players who stick with it can advance to the major leagues, where boys and girls age 10 to 12 compete for championship trophies and all-star honors.

At the tee-ball level, however, the emphasis is on fun and recreation, with little regard for the heated competition found in most athletic programs.

John Milliken of Shallotte Point said the biggest responsibility he has as a tee-ball coach is to make sure the kids enjoy themselves, regardless of whether or not they learn the first thing about baseball.

"Their attention span is very low at this age," he said, referring to the fact that it is sometimes difficult to teach the finer points of the game.

"But they do well. It gives them something to do."

Shallotte's tee-ball league started four years ago with two teams, said Andrews, and grew to include six teams this year and approximately 70 players between the ages of five and seven.

He attributes much of the league's growth to families that have moved recently to the South Brunswick Islands from areas where there were already organized tee-ball leagues. With the absence of a tee-ball league at Waccamaw and a lack of teams at Supply, the president said he expects to add one or two more teams next season.

This year's season ended last Friday with a game between the Blue Jays and Sundrop. With a narrow 10-9 victory, Sundrop ended the season tied for first place with the Tigers. Both teams had one loss.

Throughout the season, which started May 1, each team in the league played one game per week at Shallotte Municipal District Park, either on Tuesday or Thursday night.

Tee-ball, named for the tee from which the batter hits the ball, is played under normal baseball rules with just a few exceptions to make the game easier on the pint-sized players.

Andrews explained that the batter must hit the ball past a line drawn about 10 feet in front of home plate for the ball to be in play. Also, all team members are given the chance to bat while only nine play in the field.

The game is also played with a sponge-like baseball which will not hurt the youngsters, who often misjudge fly balls or use knees instead of

gloves when fielding grounders. "It won't leave a bruise if it hits a kid," said Andrews, who added that the ball travels the same distance as a normal baseball when it is batted or thrown. "It's what they call a safety ball."

With the best interests of the young players and their parents (many of whom are also coaches) in mind, tee-ball games last four innings or one hour, whichever comes first. Needless to say, innings could go on forever if it weren't for a five-run rule.

"It's not as competitive as our major league," said Andrews, explaining that there is no tee-ball all-star team or playoffs. At the end of the season, he added, all players receive trophies regardless of the team record.

Like almost all of the other coaches and assistants, Don Britt of Ocean Isle Beach became involved in tee-ball when his son, Travis, started playing two years ago. Although this was his first year with the Shallotte league, he had previous coaching experience in Lumberton where the family lived before moving to the coast earlier this year.

Britt said he agrees that the emphasis of tee-ball should be kept on enjoyment and not competition. "I have more fun than the kids do," he admitted. "I really do."

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SPORTING SCENE

Campaign Targets Prep Sports

BY JOHNNY CRAIG
"If you're not into high school sports, you're missing lots of fun" is the message being carried out by a nationwide poster campaign by the National Federation of State High School Associations.

The campaign is currently underway by the National Federation which is the administrative body for interscholastic sports and activities in America. The Quaker Oats Company, makers of Gatorade, is making the campaign possible through an education grant.

"Sports competition not only instills lifelong values of teamwork and cooperation but it also results in more self confidence, better grades and lower dropout rates among teenagers who get involved," said National Federation spokesman Brice Durbin.

"The goal of the campaign is to increase student awareness of the wide variety of high school sports programs available to them," Durbin added.

Such support at the high school level is vital because of the personal growth and enjoyment opportunities

available to teenage sport participants.

This is especially true in the 1980's with so many other activities (good and bad) competing with athletics for teenagers' time outside the classroom.

The National Federation is distributing sports-action posters to some 18,000 high schools across the nation as part of this positive, upbeat campaign.

The National Federation serves some 51 state high school athletic associations, 500,000 coaches, 500,000 sports officials and over 11 million student athletes across the nation.

Playoffs Open

Homestanding Wilmington Post 10 and Whiteville Post 137 were winners in the first game of a pair of best-of-five series in the American Legion Area II Eastern Division baseball playoffs Monday night.

Post 10 downed Bladen County 15-9 in one opener while Whiteville tripped Winter Park 11-3 in another first game.

The series continue this week with the winners meeting in a best-of-

seven title series for the Eastern Division championship.

Cup '94 Coming

World soccer history was made over the weekend when the United States was named the host site for the 1994 World Cup, the largest sporting event on the globe.

Held every four years, the World Cup comes to the U.S. for its month-long, 52-match tournament, for the world soccer championship.

As host site, the United States automatically qualifies its team for the first time in the history of the event.

Mexico is the only other country outside Europe and South America to ever host the tournament.

Other sites considered for the 1994 tourney were Brazil and Morocco. Poor economic conditions and lack of playing facilities were the chief reasons both countries were declined as hosts.

Miami's Joe Robbie Stadium, the new home of the Miami Dolphins, has been discussed as a possible World Cup site. The stadium, because of its design, has been touted as the most ideal facility for soccer in the world.

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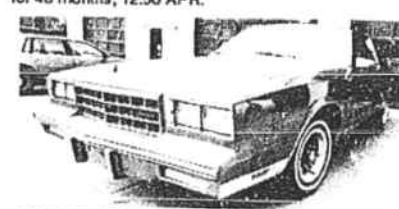
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