

Girls are more fun...but don't make them cry, says girls' softball commissioner.



New Recruit

Tom Forrester, Girls Softball Commissioner, is smiling because another six-year-old girl is signing up for softball. Recruiting started Saturday and Forrester hopes Tera Blackwell, shown here, will stay in the league until she is 18-years-old.

While the rest of Blackstone was thinking about football and the Super Bowl this weekend, Tom Forrester was up at 4 a.m. Saturday with softball on his mind—girl's softball.

He would spend the morning with a team of Brunswick Stew cooks who were cooking up a fund riser for the Blackstone recreation Association. This was the first day of recruiting for this year's girls' softball league.

Two years ago when he and his wife, Sandy, became softball commissioners there were 54 girls on four teams. Last season that number doubled with 110 girls on ten teams. "This year we're setting a goal of 165 girls," said Forrester after the stew had been sent to selling stands in town. Parents had been braving the cold January wind all morning to bring their girls to sign up. The season was already looking good.

Forrester leaned forward, like he was sharing a secret. “Now we don’t expect that to happen but you never aim low, you always aim high.” Without being asked he had hit one of the reasons his league has kept growing.

But packing Miller Field with screaming girls and cheering parents requires more than just setting goals and rules. What fires Forrester is enthusiasm and he seems to catch it from the little girls he puts on the field and praises as if they were his own daughters.

Even though he has a son who plays in the minor league, Forrester is dedicated to the girls’ league, because, as he puts it, “girls are more fun to watch.”

But putting his finger exactly on the cause of his commitment was not easy. Maybe it was because girls don’t take themselves so seriously, he offered. “A little girl does something silly and she’ll laugh at herself, while a little boy turns red.”

And then there were those eyes: “A little girl’s eyes will tell you exactly what she thinks about the situation... Girls are extremely expressive,” he said.

He could recall many hilarious encounters between a little girl and her first times at bat. “We’ve had a little girl hit the ball beautifully into right field and forget to run. She stood and jumped up and down at home plate until she was thrown out at first. Now that would have been a disaster for a boy, but she came back.

“And we’ve had little girls come up to the plate and face in the direction of the umpire, and that would be terrible for a boy.” He pointed out that he didn’t feed on the embarrassment of his girls, but that it made for a more relaxed and good time at the games. Even the parents of girls seemed to come to the games with a different attitude than the parents of boys. “The perception I get is that parents of girls are out there for the fun of watching their kids have a good time. While in the boys’ game the parents get more into the competition.”

To support this observation he said that in two years there had been no incidents he knew of where a parent had become upset with the ball part over a game. “And I know of many incidents concerning parents of boys.”

But Forrester doesn’t get any satisfaction from keeping his girls in a state of confusion about the game. Seeing those little six-year-olds improve over the year is his greatest reward, he said. And he was proud of the youngsters he watched step up to the plate. “Little girls six to 12 have grown up in an age where they’re being told that not only can they do anything boys can but they can do it as well,” he laughed. “These young ladies are very independent and aren’t taking a back seat to anybody.”

Forrester has two girls of his own who play softball but he talked as if his family now included all the girls in the league and he didn’t want his family to stop growing until every girl in Blackstone had learned to build confidence and skills on the softball field.

“Last year it was literally not safe for girls who had not signed up to walk the streets because we were looking for every child from six to 15.” That morning if someone came to buy stew that he didn’t know he asked if they had any girls that could play softball. He made softball sound like it was the most important thing a parent could get involved in.

Forrester said the league had flourished because he and his coaches stick to the age grouping rules—“We don’t make exceptions”—and tried to “design a fair league.” But it hasn’t been easy, he added, when it comes to making parents see the fairness of actions taken.

“In my first year I naively thought that all you had to do was follow the rules and nobody would fuss too much.” And he laughed again. “I was taken before the board by some parents because I wouldn’t let their children be exceptions to the age rules.”

But the most important rule of all, experience has shown him, is not to let the little girls go home crying because one of their team mates has made fun of her. If that happens they won’t be back. He and his coaches watch very closely for kids being picked on by teammates. “We were able to head off several of those situations last year,” he said.

But success has also brought problems to the girls’ softball league. Because of its growth, an alternate softball field is needed. There is just no more time left in the Tuesday and Thursday time slots that the girls have been given to play at Miller Field. And as the girls get older and keep playing, they need a larger field.

But Forrester has set his goals and he’s optimistic that these needs will be met. After all he couldn’t be less than what he sees and praises in his girls.

“I saw a girls team of 13-15-year-olds get a standing ovation for a losing effort last year. The team had been decimated by chicken pox and had played a full strength team and almost won.”

“That was a very impressive display of guts,” he said.