

## Differences of opinion cause division between county's booster clubs

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Throughout the spring, baseball fields all across Davidson County have been packed with players of all ages and ability levels.

But there is a difference in philosophy in the area that will be highlighted in the coming weeks. Fields in some communities will become vacant, turning into simple fenced areas of dirt and grass. Others will continue to be filled with excited children and proud friends and family members.

The division in the county was created three years ago, when half the communities in the county broke from the Davidson County Parks and Recreation Department and joined Babe Ruth baseball. Midway, Welcome, Arcadia, Reeds and Churchland all decided to join the national organization in hopes of providing their children with opportunities they didn't think they were getting from the county. This spring, Davis-Townsend decided to join Babe Ruth, bringing the total to six communities and essentially splitting the county's participation right down the middle.

For middle-school-aged boys, the different communities in the county organized the Davidson County Junior League in 2002. While the teams are not directly affiliated with the schools in their area, they do have a chance to represent their school districts and gain extra experience to help them prepare for high school baseball.

Recreation Department puts the focus on fun

Charles Parnell, the director of the Davidson County Parks and Recreation Department, enjoys baseball season despite the battle with rainouts, finding umpires, vacant fields and parental problems. Parnell maintains the county's primary focus is to provide any child who lives in the county a chance to play baseball.

"We try to offer recreational programs for every child that chooses to play," Parnell said. "Our program doesn't single out the good ones, the bad ones or whatever.

"Our priority is on having fun. A lot of times people's primary goal is to win, win, win, and we try to discourage that. Yes, there's going to be competition, and as

long as you keep score there are going to be wins and losses. But it's our belief that wins and losses are not the most important thing."

Instead of the won-loss column, Parnell believes coaches and parents can gauge their team's progress in other ways.

"We want to give every kid an opportunity to enjoy it and have fun and to develop relationships with their friends. It is not our job to prepare kids for high school.

"I don't think you determine success by wins and losses; it's where are you when you start and where are you when you finish."

Davis-Townsend 10-under coach Randy Holmes chose to remain with the county recreation program despite the booster club's vote to join the other communities in Babe Ruth League play. Holmes felt like the play in the rec department suited his needs better than the more intense Babe Ruth League.

"I think what the rec offers is for all players," he said. "I just think if we don't reach out to the lesser-skilled players then they won't have a place to play."

Holmes thinks there is a legitimate resolution that could satisfy all parents, but it would require a great deal of cooperation between groups that don't necessarily see eye-to-eye.

"If the county offered a competitive league and a less-competitive league for all age groups, I think we could please more folks. Years ago we had an A team and a B team, but parents got mad if they thought their child should be on the A team. So we quit doing that.

"But we need to be sensitive and put kids in situations where they can succeed. Baseball's kind of like swimming - you've got to be put in a position to get better, and then you'll be successful."

Dissatisfaction leads some elsewhere

While some parents just want their children to have fun in sports, others want youth baseball to provide a foundation for years of fun as well as success on the diamond. So a group of parents led their communities to participate with the Babe Ruth League, which provided more structured play and what they considered a better learning experience for their children.

Churchland's Tim Freeman was one of the parents who led his community, along with Reeds-Jimmy Hamblin, Welcome-Wayne Briggs, Midway-Don Lanfried and Arcadia-Mike Darrow, to pull out of the county recreation department three years

ago. The need was there, Freeman said, and the county was not willing to meet the needs being expressed by the parents.

“They pretty much had their minds made up they weren’t going to do it from the start,” Freeman said. “The biggest deal with them was they didn’t see the need for what we wanted.

“Before, when we were with the rec department, we just played local teams, but that was as far as we went. Randolph, Rowan and Forsyth counties all expanded and were taking some of our kids into the Little League program.”

And with Babe Ruth, the children have an opportunity to do things they can’t do with the recreation department. Freeman said there is a regular season, then a postseason tournament involving every team in the league.

“Then we pick all-stars from the whole county from every age group, and they play in a district tournament. From there, you go on to a state tournament, and all the way up to the World Series.”

Freeman said this postseason circuit is a major draw for children to play in the Babe Ruth League, and the children are talking about the all-star tournaments as soon as sign-ups start. And he believes the communities who do not participate in Babe Ruth play have no choice: The booster clubs in Babe Ruth own their fields, so they can do what they want, but the county owns the fields the other communities play on, so they are obligated to play with the county.

And Todd Hanes, who has two children playing at Davis-Townsend, disagrees with the theory that it’s not the county’s job to prepare the children for high school play.

“Our recreation department could have fended all this off if they had gone to an A-B league and offered all-star and tournament play,” Hanes said. “But they have to appeal to the masses and please as many people as they can, and I respect that.”

Hanes likes the fact that Babe Ruth offers children the best of both worlds. All children get to play who want to play, and the league offers postseason all-star tournaments.

“I’m a big fan of recreation sports,” he added. “And it’s very, very important that each and every child, regardless of skill level, gets a chance to play the sport they want to play.

“A kid on the bubble, you can help him through a tough time. And we’re teaching kids life lessons. Look what a kid can get the opportunity to do if he plays.”

Parnell says the county tried to do something similar at one time, and it didn't work out. "We chose to join a national organization (Pony League), and we found out it did not coincide with our thoughts and ideas," he said.

"Their primary focus was, they didn't care what we did as long as we pay money and come to tournaments."

And the all-star play, Parnell argues, is not preparing children for high school, anyway. "We try to pattern our rules and regulations after the North Carolina High School Athletic Association; that's sort of our guide. And you don't win a state championship and go on to all-star play. That's it."

Some parents may argue American Legion baseball is an all-star circuit for high school players, providing the best players from each county additional game time against the best players in high school baseball.

Kevin Bowers, president of the Hasty Boosters Club, said his club's decision was a no-brainer.

"I just believe at the time (the other communities joined Babe Ruth) we were OK with what the county program had to offer," Bowers said. "Overall, we had a sound program, and I'm just not sure we saw the need to change."

Bowers, who has two children who play at Hasty, has a different perspective on the level of competition. He coaches his 12-year-old daughter on a travel team, and that is where the wheat is separated from the chaff.

"There's a big difference between Babe Ruth and county ball and travel ball," he added. "It's just a different world. It's a lot different, a lot more competitive. USSSA and NSA (United States Specialty Sports Association and National Softball Association) and all these travel leagues are designed for somebody who's looking for a little more than recreation."

"Travel ball is just a supplement for some kids who are going into middle school ball, where they have to make the team (or get cut). And travel ball's getting to be big in the county. But if I were completely dissatisfied with county ball I would just do travel ball."

### The D-T decision

After remaining with the recreation department through the first wave of Babe Ruth defections, some parents with Davis-Townsend decided they needed a change. So Nelson Brown, who was booster club president at the time, organized a vote, and an overwhelming majority chose to pull out of the recreation department. Hanes said he voted to remain with the county to avoid a split

booster club. Ironically, that's exactly what happened. Four members voted for the county, 25 others voted to pull out.

The problem the community faced was the booster club, unlike the other five already participating in Babe Ruth, did not own the Davis-Townsend field. So the county and the booster club have conflicting reports about what happened next: The booster club says the county told them their children could not use the field because it was county property; the county says the booster club went to county manager Robert Hyatt and the commissioners, who said the field was county property, and they could use it.

As a testament to both sides, they reached a resolution and agreed to split time at the field. So far, they have proven they can coexist.

So three coaches have county recreation teams playing under the D-T umbrella, and the rest of the children in the community play under Babe Ruth sanctions.

One of the other key problems was an age gap in the league breakdown. If a child's birthday fell between April 30 and Aug. 1, that child would be too old for C-ball but not old enough for Pee Wee. Babe Ruth had a solution for that by breaking down each age bracket as 8-under, 10-under, etc. In turn, a 7-year-old could play 10-under, if his parents thought he were skilled enough.

Brown said the switch was a reflection of the community's desires.

"We put it up to the parents to vote on. That's what the parents wanted, so that's what we've got."

Some who either didn't attend the vote or found out at the last minute accused the members of the club who wanted to switch of not notifying the members there would be a vote. That's not true, Hanes said. "I think they did a good job of getting the word out to the parents, via letters at the school and other things," he said. "It was talked about in the community when the vote would be, and the voting results were announced at that meeting."

### Junior League offers additional preparation

In 2002, a group headed by Eddie Gray organized the Davidson County Junior League. There was initially only one division of play, but because of the interest that was sparked each area in the county now has two teams.

"Some larger schools had 40-50 kids come out for tryouts," Gray said. "So now for the schools that can, they have two teams. This is the second year we've had two divisions.

“Our intent was just to have one team from each community, but some dads volunteered to help. And this gave 12-15 more kids an opportunity to play.”

The Junior League is similar to middle school football, with teams made up of boys in seventh and eighth grade. Due to a lack of funding and Title IX restrictions with the county school system, it is not affiliated with the schools but played at the club level. And it provides children with valuable experience as they prepare for high school baseball.

“It is another league that offers kids an opportunity to face high school baseball, as far as the rules go,” Gray said. “Some of the dads in the communities had some concern about their kids not being prepared for high school baseball, so we took it upon ourselves to form a league.

“It’s really been exciting. And it’s been very competitive. In our B-League, one run determined the county champion. In the A-League, one run determined the county champion.” North I beat Central I 5-4, and Central II beat North II 4-3 in the title games at Southmont field May 1.

Lexington joined play this season, and Gray said he hopes Thomasville and Sheets Memorial can form teams in the near future to create a true countywide league.

Problems with fan behavior give children a bad influence

There have been some highly publicized instances of poor fan behavior in all sports at all levels. Unfortunately this lack of sportsmanship has made its way into youth sports, and this area is no exception. No one is exactly sure why fan behavior has deteriorated so much over the last few years, but everyone agrees about the decline.

“It’s very difficult to emphasize participation when parents and coaches say you’ve gotta win, gotta win,” Parnell added. “You can still be competitive and have fun, too. I want to go see a ballgame and see parents cheering for both teams.”

Parnell believes the responsibility for modeling good behavior for spectators falls on the shoulders of the coaches.

“As a coach you should encourage people to cheer for your team, but they don’t have to cheer against the other team.

“But so many people just take it so serious they just blow it out of proportion.”

A great deal of the ire is directed at umpires, often high school students hoping to make a little spending money for the summer. Parnell says most parents have the same expectations of the youngsters in the blue shirts. “They don’t look at the official and want a fair game. They just want them to give their kid an unfair advantage.

“It’s getting to the point where we have to beg people to officiate. Whether they call a good game or a bad game, they’re going to get screamed at and humiliated.

“Officiating is a very difficult thing to do, and we deal with a lot of young officials. They do go through some training, but we can’t train them on how to deal with irresponsible adults. I just wish I had a magic button I could mash, and everybody would have a good attitude about youth sports. But somewhere we’ve lost sight of what youth sports is all about.”