

Sandlot Baseball a Home Run With Kids

Indoor league at Sports Barn lets players play and learn on the fly

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(Halfmoon, NY) At the Sports Barn last Tuesday night in Halfmoon, Steve Fink of Latham had to put a hand over his mouth to keep from yelling out instructions to his son Jeremy, who was playing in the championship game of the facility's Arena Ball league.

With no input from coaches, fathers or instructors, Fink's son's team, the Tri-City Cavemen, lost the second game out of a best of three series, 17-8, to the Greenwich Gangrene. While the loss was probably harder for Fink to take than his son, the lesson of the "sandlot" league came through to all the players, the parents and facilities workers who watched the game.

"It's a self-organized league," said Fink, who grimaced more than once during the best of three games. "They put together their lineups, they decide when to bunt, when to run and when to swing. They take everything they learned from playing and taking lessons and put it to work."

After nine weeks of regular season games, championship games were held in the 9-10 age division and 11-12 age bracket. Teams with the highest total points collected from wins, losses and ties during the season advanced to the championship series.

The Scotia Sluggers won the 9-10 age group championship by defeating the Burnt Hills Baboons, while the Cavemen finally won the older age division title by winning, 13-6, in the third and final game.

Norm Hayner, who owns The Sports Barn with his brother, Ken, came up with the idea of developing an indoor winter league that allowed kids to have fun, but at the same time put their skills to use on their own.

"There is not enough sandlot baseball," Norm Hayner said. "Kids don't go down to the park and play games anymore, which is understandable with the times we live in. We wanted the kids to have a place to play and not feel any pressure, well-meaning or otherwise."

For 11-year-old Chad Niles, who played on Greenwich Gangrene, the indoor league allowed him to have a little more fun than he had during past winters.

When asked what he used to do in the winter, Niles said, "throw snowballs, play video games and walk around."

Starting in October, each of the 19 teams in the league played one hour-long game each week.

All pitching was done by a machine, which shoots the balls out at about 45 miles-per-hour to batters. It wasn't unusual to have every player on a team to finish with two or more hits a game.

Nic Azer of Niskayuna led the league in home runs. Playing on the SaraNisky squad, Azer swatted 13 home runs during the season.

"Sometimes you hit a ball and it hits the ceiling and will probably be caught," said Azer, who had played in an indoor league in Ohio where his family is from. "A triple outside might only be a single here."

Norm Hayner said playing with a non-traditional baseball, having a rubber floor and netting up that keeps all balls in play, makes the game faster and more offensive. He said he patterned it after arena football.

But it was on the defensive side of the ball that the 143 kids who played in the league were tested. On defense, players switched their positions throughout the game, which made for some interesting throws and strategy.

For Caveman player Zach Breen of Latham, the league was fun to be part of because of the excitement.

“It’s indoors, and anything can happen,” he said.

Well, almost anything. There will never be any adult involvement.

“We get asked a lot by parents, why we don’t stop the game and instruct,” Norm Hayner said. “This is an opportunity for the kids to play and learn on the fly. We’re not going to stop a game and step in and explain. They’ll learn from peer pressure.”

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