

Beginners go undefeated

Girl softballers don't mess with Ponytails

By Pat Bordman
special writer

Imagine being 9, with your first baseball glove, running for the first time in a pair of cleats, and playing in your very first organized softball game.

Now, imagine winning all 16 of the games — every game of the season.

That was the experience of the Ponytails, 14 hardworking little girls in the Novice division of the West Bloomfield/North Farmington Baseball for Youth League.

Apparently, their repeated successes did not inflate their egos, for they were just as nervous for their final game as they were for their first.

"Before each game she would get nervous. The girls always thought the other team's nine-year-olds looked bigger or were better fielders. As each game came along they thought they would lose," said one mother.

But, the girls didn't lose. Each girl was at bat about 40 times, scoring a team total of 289 runs. Their batting averages ranged from .250 to an amazing .864.

The averages don't tell the whole story, however. And, their success did not come easily — they worked for it, according to their team manager, Nancy Gressler. The team practiced after school two and three times a week before the season's games began.

They had to do the usual drills on fielding and running, but because of the girls' inexperience, they also had to be taught the fundamentals of the game itself — where to stand in the field, where to throw the ball if it comes to you, how to relay — all were practiced.

Still discontent, Gressler insisted on warm-ups before each game to calm the girls and renew their confidence.

It was more than hard work that made the difference for this team. Gressler believes the parents' interest also had a lot to do with their overwhelming success.

"We had a meeting before the season actually started. The parents all offered to help out in any way they could. We worked with two coaches, Barb Coulson and Kathy Dawson, besides myself as manager. Some of the other teams only had the manager or just one coach."

"And," she continued, "our parents saw to it that the girls came to as many practices as possible, and that helped. Of course, our attendance was outstanding. We had parents, grandparents, aunts, cousins, friends. No other team had as many watching as we did."

The girls also had a manager with some unusual attitudes. "I never reprimanded them when they were on the field if they did something wrong. I also disliked yelling out instructions because then they're looking at me and not at the game. So, once the game started I tried not to talk to them and confuse them," Gressler explained.

"If I ever thought they were doing terrible I wouldn't want them to know. I always thought they were trying the best they could."

This manager had another unusual philosophy. She never allowed the girls to know the score until the game was completed. Though they won every game, usually by wide margins, the

girls actually thought they had lost some games because of this unique practice.

"I don't let them know because they become too aware of a score rather than a ball game," Gressler said. "I don't even keep track myself. I'm more interested in the way they play than in the scoring."

Encouraging a good attitude was uppermost on Nancy Gressler's mind. After one game, the losing team members reacted quite strongly by throwing bases, pushing each other, and screaming.

"After that happened, at our very next practice, we sat down in the shade and talked about losing. How they would feel if they lost. I told them I expected them to be good sports. I don't think there's anything wrong with crying, but it wouldn't do any good to throw a helmet or a bat. I didn't want them to lose their tempers," Gressler explained.

The overall league includes girls age 8 through high school graduates, most of them have never played on an undefeated team. In fact, the league purposely tries to prevent one team sweeps like this from occurring.

"Actually, we don't like to see this happen and we hope it never happens again," reported Caroline Greenberg, novice division president and herself manager of a novice team.

"We strive to make it as even as we can. We try to set the teams up so that on each team there are girls with the same experience level," she said.

The league feels children should experience both winning and losing.

"We want to create a league in all age groups that is fair and everybody has a chance to know what it is to win and lose. We want them to have a good experience and learn. We try not to stress first place," Greenberg said.

Nevertheless, the Ponytails received an ovation at the league awards ceremony after it was announced their team was the only undefeated girls team this year.

The mother of one Ponytail put it this way:

"After the first few games I warned

her that the team would probably lose. But, then I thought about how young they are. They'll face lots of defeats in their lives. But, how many times is a person able to enjoy the knowledge that they were part of the best, and that they contributed to the effort that was so successful? So, I stopped warning her. I didn't want to say anything that

would take away the joy and excitement of those moments."

The Ponytails team members are: Lori Bessick, Erin Benjamin, Amy Bordman, Kelly Coulson, Bridget Dawson, Lissa Erlich, Becky Gressler, Pam Gressler, Allison Kole, Stacey Lakhd, Stacey Moss, Elizabeth Patrick, Rayna Steinberg and Ronda Steinbock.



Kelly Coulson gets some words of wisdom from manager Nancy Gressler, while her teammates wait for their turn.

PAT BORDMAN



The last act of the final game of the season is saying thank you for a good game. The Ponytails are the girls in the light uniforms, while the defeated Chickadees are in the dark uniforms.

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