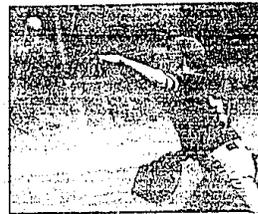


Diamond Gem

The hidden jewel of Farmington Hills



A field of dreams of their own

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A gemologist doesn't need to field ground balls to know a brilliant diamond. Likewise, a baseball *betizen* can appraise a gem when he sees one.

All eyes are on a baseball field off Middlebelt Road, between Grand River and Shiawassee.

"It's the hidden jewel of Farmington Hills," said Mike Kish, a Hills youth baseball coach.

It's a field trip that inspires poetic ramblings about emerald green grass, red brick clay and white lines encasing dreams of child and adult alike.

Youth baseball coach Lou Pirronello transformed the once weedy softball field into an uprightly baseball diamond, which has kids and parents raving alike. The field bears all the amenities of a Major League ground.

A well-maintained grass infield leads to a wondrous outfield more resembling a billiard table top. A green outfield fence is topped with a yellow plastic lining to give youth hitters something to aim.

Other features make the Little League game a major event. Players stand for the National Anthem, which is filtered over a public address system.

Each kid's name is announced when he steps into the batter's box and music filters throughout the park between innings. After the last out, each child picks up a rake or a hose to maintain their field's luster.

"We really take pride in our field," said Pirronello, whose Detroit Concentrated Security Systems Dodgers 12- and 13-year-old teams call the place home. "We love hearing, 'This is the greatest field for 12-year-

olds all around.' We can't hear that enough."

Pirronello, a former assistant baseball coach at Madonna University, took his cue from Mike George, who transformed Livonia Denby High's diamond into a first-rate college field.

Pirronello's Dodger teams played at the Farmington Hills field, which used to be owned by the Knights of Columbus. Steppingstone School bought the building and leased the field.

At one point, Pirronello was told baseball was done being played there.

"We were disappointed," said Pirronello, who lives in Livonia. "We told them we'd go there and make it look a little better."

Pirronello and a volunteer crew reseeded bare spots in the outfield and added a sprinkler system. During the second year, a grass infield was added with red clay imported from down South.

In addition to a visually pleasing red hue, the special dirt ensures a truer bounce.

"It's a little hard getting out of the uniforms, but it's really nice stuff," Pirronello said.

His Dodger team plays a 21-game league schedule but road games are increasingly fewer. Opposing teams want to play at their field instead.

"It just puts you in the mood to play the game," said Pirronello, whose son Mark Vince is on the Dodger team.

As 11-year-olds, the Detroit Concentrated Securities Dodgers won eight games before bowing out of the CABA World Series in Missouri last summer. The 12-year-old Dodger team went 4-0 last season and earned a trip to the Pee Wee Reese World Series.

"It's quality baseball played on a quality field," Pirronello said.



Almost ready: Lou Pirronello warms up his team before the evening's game begins.

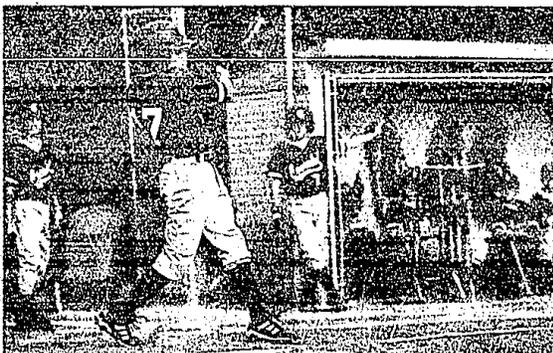


STAFF PHOTOS BY BILL HAZELDE

Grooming: Bill Szpyrka (top left) marks fresh lines on the field. Pat

Rusin waters the infield.

Chris Rusin (top right) fields a hit and fires the ball to home plate. (At right) the teams line up for the national anthem.



Chewing: Kyle Price (above) grabs a cheekful of bubble gum before the next inning starts. Alan Hagedon (left) swings at a pitch.