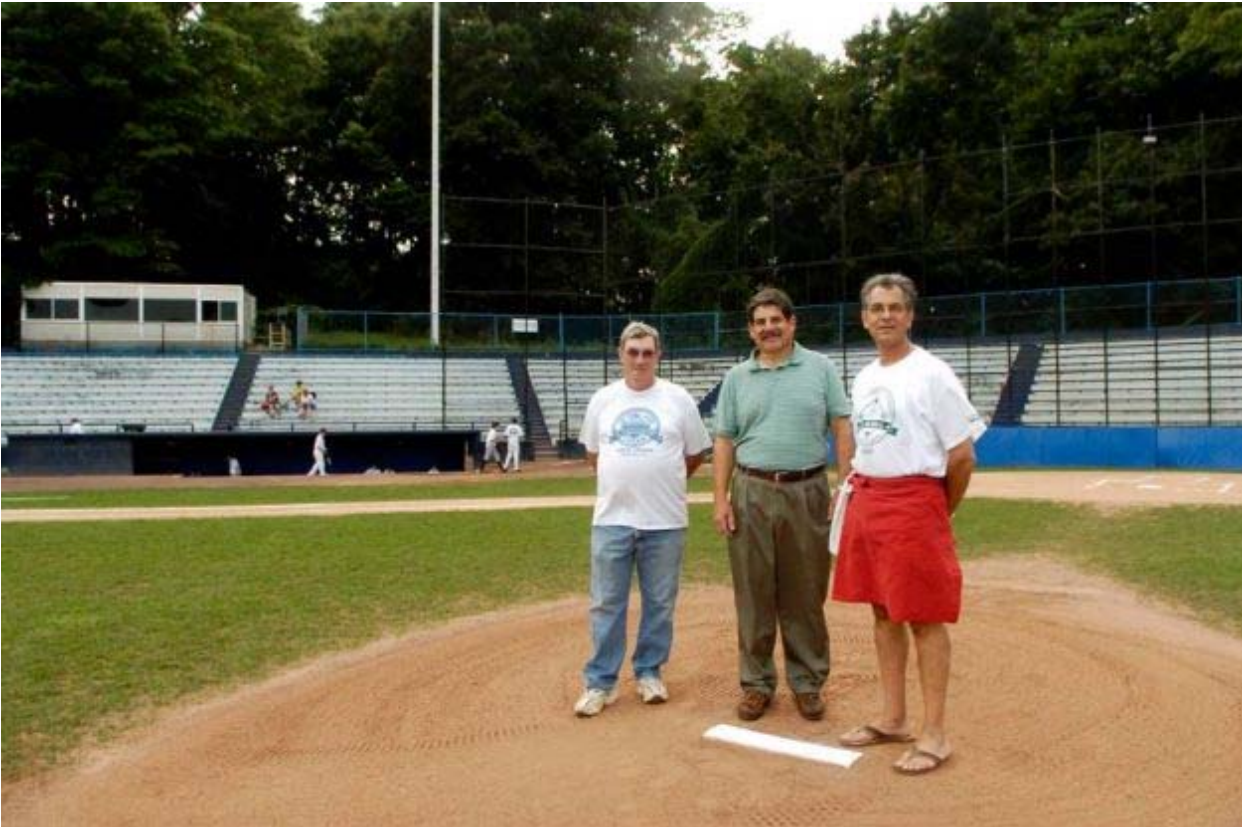


Shark week: After 23 years, Laurenno Tournament still going strong

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STAMFORD -- Year in and year out, after All-Star teams finish their district, state and regional tournaments, the ping of baseball bats can still be heard in Cubeta Stadium one last time, during the dog days of summer, at the Sharkey Laurenno Memorial Tournament and Scholarship Event.

This marks the 24th year of the tournament, held in honor of John "Sharkey" Laurenno, a Stamford sports icon, who was one of the founders of Stamford Babe Ruth baseball. He died in 1987 at the age of 75.

"After Sharkey's passing a bunch of us felt that we should keep his name alive by starting this event," said co-president Judd Bell. "Nick Corbo, Lou (Sclafani), (John) Saba and the rest of us never dreamed in 1987 that this would be so successful for so long. We wanted to let kids know that if it wasn't for guys like Sharkey, there wouldn't be the organized ball there is today."

The tournament, which began July 31, runs through next Wednesday, with 14 teams competing in U-14 and U-15 divisions. Thirty games are played in that span, twice daily during the week, starting at 5:30 p.m., with five games on both Saturdays and Sundays. After pool play, the single-elimination playoffs begin on Monday, with each division's final on Wednesday.

This year's event showcases teams from Trumbull, Danbury, Greenwich, Westchester County, New York City and four teams from Stamford.

For those participating, the tournament is more than a fundraiser. For the Stamford teams, it is a chance to play against each other. Not only can different aged Babe Ruth teams compete, but Babe Ruth teams get to play their Stamford Legion adversaries.

"It's all about bragging rights," said Jackson Solis, who plays for Stamford Legion in the U-14 division.

"We want to kick their butts and they want to kick ours," said Jimmy Maple, coach of Stamford Legion, on Tuesday night before his team played the U-14 Babe Ruth All-Stars. "The kids know each other from school and Little League so it's a lot of fun."

All the proceeds, from donations and the concession stand, go directly to the Sharkey Laureno Scholarship, which has provided over \$200,000 for college funding to over 100 recipients since the event's inception.

Award winners often come back to work and help collect donations. Six umpires donating their time are past recipients.

"Sharkey is one of the biggest names in Stamford baseball and it's just an honor," said Bryan Cooper, who is entering his junior year at UConn. "Just look at the names on the list of past winners and you see how big a deal it is."

When the tournament began, the fund gave two scholarships worth \$1,000. Last year the event raised over \$20,000 for 16 students. At this point the goal for the organizers is to increase the size of the scholarships to go along with the increased number of winners, eventually providing \$2,000 for each.

One thing that has remained constant is the criteria. Winners must have graduated from the Babe Ruth Junior Program, be in at least their sophomore year in college and have a 2.5 grade point average.

In 1953, when Babe Ruth Baseball Inc. was founded nationwide, Stamford, led by Laureno, was a charter member. Laureno led Stamford to the World Series title that first year with players such as Bobby Valentine and Mickey Lione Jr.

Laureno's love of his city and helping kids did not end with coaching baseball -- he won numerous titles over a 25-year career. Laureno was also a long-time umpire on the board of the Stamford Umpire Union and a high school football and basketball referee, as well as coach of the Boys Club youth basketball team.

"This has been our way of giving back to the kids of Stamford over the years," co-president Saba said from a picnic table at Cubeta Stadium. "This event was a good idea when they started it in 1987, they sucked me in for the second year and now here we are over 20 years later."

When the tournament was founded, there was no summer ball for 14- and 15-year-old players. Today, there are so many summer leagues and showcases that the Laureno tournament has had difficulty obtaining commitments from some teams.

The drive of people like Corbo, who passed away last year after a long battle with cancer, is a motivating force. This fall the group will hold its first charity fundraiser, a wine and food tasting.

"There was nothing for 14-year-olds to do but now there is so much competition, it is getting harder to field teams," said Sclafani, the foundation's treasurer. "But the loss of Corbo last year will keep me going for a while."



