

Sharkey Laurenno Tournament still a Stamford sports fixture

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STAMFORD -- Fundraising is more challenging and attendance has been sagging, but 23 years after its formation to honor one of the most respected sports figures in Stamford history, the Sharkey Laurenno Tournament is still going strong.

This year's event will end its 10-day run at Cubeta Stadium tonight with a pair of championship games. With the final out, 16 teams will have played 30 games in two age groups. More importantly, to the organizers, 16 graduates of the Stamford Junior Babe Ruth program will have received approximately \$18,000 in scholarships toward college.

"It's quite an effort, it really is," said Lou Sclafani, the tournament finance chairman. "Sometimes we find ourselves shorthanded, but we manage. We'd love to see bigger crowds and more support. But this has been the best year we've had for solicitations, which is surprising because of the economy."

Though there was a sparse turnout on a steamy night for Monday's semifinal games, a palpable spirit of optimism was evident among the 30 or so volunteers who spent months planning the tournament, and are now reaping the benefits for their efforts.

"One of the things we always try to do is improve on the previous year," said Judd Bell, the Laurenno chairman and field director. "We keep notes over what went wrong the previous year and what we can do to make it better."

In tonight's 14-year-old final, Stamford will face Greenwich. The 15-year-old championship will feature the winners of Monday night's games between Stamford and Pelham, and Kingsbridge and Greenwich. Seven communities from Connecticut and New York had teams entered, including six from Stamford.

"I think it's a tribute to the people," Bell said. "Our group has gotten a little bit bigger. We grind it out for 10 days, say thanks and start planning for next year."

Laureno, who passed away in 1987 at the age of 75, was a renowned coach in Stamford Babe Ruth, leading a city team to the initial World Series title in 1953 and numerous national, regional, state and district championships thereafter.

At the time of Laureno's death, the family requested donations be made to Stamford American Babe Ruth. But a group of friends, spearheaded by Nick Corbo, decided to use the money to start a tournament in Laureno's memory.

In that first year, there were two scholarships of \$500 apiece awarded using the same criteria that is applied today: applicants had to play in the Babe Ruth Junior Program, attend college and maintain at least a 2.5 grade point average.

This year's recipients received anywhere between \$500 and \$1,500.

A lot of the tournament revenue comes from donations, raffles and the concession stand, which is run by Sclafani, who is renowned for his sausage and pepper sandwiches.

"The logistics are easier but the work doesn't get any easier," said Sclafani, who recalled the days when drinks and food were kept in a children's swimming pool, and frequent runs were made to Bobby Valentine's Sports Gallery Cafe for ice.

The umpiring crew donates half of its earnings back to the tournament, as has been the case since the first year.

"Everyone realizes it is about helping the kids in the community," said Bell, who is a painting contractor. "It's not much, but it's a little something, and on the baseball side you can come play in this great facility. My biggest joy is when the players, coaches and parents come up to you after they have been eliminated and say thank you."

This summer the mood has been somewhat melancholy after the passing of Corbo, one of the tournament's driving forces, who lost a long battle with cancer on Memorial Day weekend at the age of 65.

For Corbo, who made a life-long commitment to youth baseball in Stamford, the Laureno Tournament was one of his greatest passions. Last year, though struggling with his health, Corbo still made an appearance at Cubeta almost daily.

"It's very difficult," said Bell. "He was like the heart that kept pumping everyone else. He was the lifeline."

Sclafani, who is a hardware and software reseller for IBM, said Corbo's absence was apparent, especially with pictures and tributes to him hanging around the stadium.

"Last year was hard for him because he couldn't spend as much time because he was in a lot of pain," Sclafani said. "The one thing he really wanted to do was see it through this summer, but he didn't make it."

This year a community service award in Corbo's name was awarded for the first time.

It went to George Ducanic, who among many other things has served as the general manager of the American Legion Post 3 baseball program for the past 30 years."

This year the crowds have averaged anywhere between 20 and 70 people, far below the 200-300 in the past.

"Our best year was 1994, when major league baseball was on strike," Bell recalled. "We were the only game in town. All the die-hard people who couldn't watch the Yankees or couldn't watch the Mets came down here."

Though the number of empty seats are now greater, it has failed to diminish the spirit and tradition of one of Stamford's most time-honored events.

"One of the goals Nick and I always talked about was giving each winner \$2,000," Bell said. "Hopefully we can keep working hard, raise the money and make it come true."

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