

THE CASE FOR BABE RUTH BASEBALL

We would like to share a letter with each of you submitted to Babe Ruth Headquarters a few years back from Coach Pannell of the Springfield, Virginia Babe Ruth League

As a parent and coach who has been involved with Springfield Babe Ruth, I'd like to share my thoughts on some of the choices in youth baseball, especially in Springfield and Northern Virginia. I believe my experiences are in some ways unique in that it has been my great good fortune to have been involved in baseball not just here in Springfield, but in the largest Little League program in Plano, Texas. In addition, I have been involved with college and pro baseball through my son Jonathan (JJ) who played in national events for pro scouts, has been recruited by many Division I Universities and has been scouted heavily by Major League Baseball. I have coached teams at every level of Little League and Babe Ruth, as well as coached a High School Franchise team for a top ranked program in the Metro area. I have also managed multiple league all-star teams and believe that these experiences have given me a national and local perspective that may help some parents and players as they decide what directions to pursue in baseball.

First of all, the very fact that a player still wants to play baseball beyond the age of 12 indicates a love for the game and an interest in progressing in the sport. So, naturally questions come to mind. "What is the best way to progress in the sports?" "How do we make sure the sport remains FUN even as skills are improved?" "Will progress be made more rapidly in an all inclusive league like Babe Ruth or by joining an elite or travel team?" Having gone through this as a parent, I know that the choices aren't easy ones and much is involved both for the player and his/her parents. I will just share our experiences over the years in hopes that it might be of benefit to some of you in making these choices.

Our son JJ was always a pretty good player and loved baseball completely. Starting when he was 12, he was asked every spring and fall season to join an elite or travel team or another. This continued for many years. The case for these "elite/travel teams" was pretty much the same, regardless of the particular team it happened to be. We were told that JJ would be playing with *better* players, receive superior coaching, and get more exposure to the top people in area baseball. Also, most of these teams were travel teams who played in tournaments in other areas and other states. Of course, JJ and his parents were thrilled and excited that he'd been asked. And JJ knew many of the players who were going to be playing for these teams. So, we talked about it as a family, though the final decision rested with JJ.

Season after season, this process happened in our family. And JJ always said "No" to the elite/travel teams. Instead, he chose to play with the Springfield Babe Ruth league and Northern Virginia Fall Baseball. We agreed with his reasons for playing with a community-based league. Here are some of them:

- On the issue of *playing with the best players*, we felt that though there were many fine players on these elite/travel teams, there were lots of fine players not on those teams who played with the

Springfield Babe Ruth League. Also, JJ knew that many players who weren't *great* at the moment certainly could get better and better, and end up doing things on the field. That added to the fun factor in playing. It's always a blast to see improvement and great plays from teammates who might not be expected to make them by his coach. Plus JJ didn't really want to be around only *hard-core* baseball players. He wanted to be around and get to know all kinds of players. Basically, he wanted to keep it fun. He didn't want the thing he loved most to become like a business where he was being groomed for greatness or something. And we as his parents agreed this was the best way to insure JJ getting better was to keep it all as just fun.

- On the issue of *superior coaching*, in my opinion there are some very good coaches in the Springfield Babe Ruth program and on the elite/travel teams. I've found in my years as a player and as a coach that this is true in every league and in every program. I will say however that I have special respect for those coaches who are volunteers in community programs. And it has been my experience with the Springfield Babe Ruth League that the coaches are very good people who try to do their best for the team, and not just for their particular child.
- On the issue of *exposure to top baseball people*, I will just say that JJ never played for a travel team until he was already being scouted by Major League Baseball and was being recruited by Division I colleges. The one exception was when he was a senior in high school and played on a Fall Travel Team that was selected and coached by Atlanta Braves scouts. This was after JJ had pretty much decided on a college. Clearly, we don't feel that JJ's baseball progress was hindered at all by not playing travel ball. He got a full tuition and room scholarship to a fine Division I University and was offered selection in a top ten round in the Major League Draft. Honestly, I give much credit for his success thus far to his years playing in the Springfield Babe Ruth League. JJ isn't unique in this. There were several local players who have received scholarship and draft offers after playing for years with Springfield.

Another thing to think about is playing time. I've always felt that players progress in baseball through game innings. Clinics and individual instruction can be great and very useful, but experience in actually games is invaluable to players becoming better overall. Many travel teams have 15-20 players on their roster. This affects the number of innings that each player plays. Most travel teams play three games over a weekend for a total of 21 innings. I knew several players in those programs who typically play 3-6 innings each weekend. The rosters in Springfield Babe Ruth League typically number 11 or 12 players. The smaller roster sizes and league concepts and rules on playing time provide for more game innings for most players.

In my mind, Babe Ruth Baseball offers something else that greatly increases the fun factor for players, coaches and parents. Something to play for as a team. Each game means something. During the season, teams have the goals of winning their division and of making the playoffs. Once in the playoffs, there is the game by game goal of winning a tournament championship. Having these goals promotes fun and teaches the players to pull together as a team. It really helps make it all so enjoyable to the players and parents who support the team. Finally, after the season is over, the players and coaches select all-star teams. These teams have District, State, Regional and National championships to play for.

Babe Ruth Baseball has been an outstanding program for many years and playing in one of their leagues is a very rewarding experience. And as for the Springfield Babe Ruth League, I couldn't begin to express the wonderful experiences JJ had in his years playing for the league. So many great people, so many great games, and such a great atmosphere for the player's improvement and enjoyment.

I guess I write this because my wife and I are so grateful for a group of people and a league that helped our son progress and prepare, as a person and as a player, to the point where he has opportunities. The opportunity of higher education to stand him in good stead in his life and the opportunity to pursue his dreams in baseball.

Coach Pannell