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What happened to Legion baseball?

By Chris Hunn, Register Staff

American Legion baseball used to be the main attraction during the summer.

Just ask longtime University of New Haven baseball coach Frank "Porky" Vieira. Enthusiastically, he will back that statement with stories about the local Legion scene, and how the top high school players consistently filled it from June through August. He will talk about how games were packed daily with college and professional scouts. He offers personal memories such as watching his late brother Gus Vieira pitch in a regular season game at Bridgeport's Seaside Park at diamond No. 1 in front of the 1,000 people.

But those days appear to be over.

Now the top high school players in the state are scattered among Legion and travel teams or traveling to showcases. College and professional scouts have the overwhelming task of picking and choosing where to look. Most say showcases and travel tournaments are the most sensible and convenient, as they offer coaches and scouts the chance to see many talented players in a short period of time. And to find anywhere close to 1,000 people in the stands at a regular-season Legion game in the area is unheard of.

"Legion is a little watered down with so many opportunities for kids, and they are exploring them," Southern Connecticut State baseball coach Tim Shea said. "Legion is

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definitely taking a hit from that."

UConn coach Jim Penders cites other reasons for the change.

The NCAA allows 85 football and 13 men's basketball scholarships for each Division I school. Baseball teams are only permitted 11.7. With college coaches headed mostly to showcases, Penders says players follow with hope of getting a slice of the limited scholarship pie.

Penders also notes increasing the Legion age limit from 18 to 19 has pushed younger players, who are looking to be seen by colleges, elsewhere.

Two of the more popular outlets for those players are these showcases along with travel teams.

Bob Turcio, director of the Connecticut Bombers, one of the elite travel teams in the state, says his players pay on the higher end of \$2,000 to play an average of 55 to 60 games a summer, including some of the most coveted national tournaments. Though playing for the Bombers may carry a hefty price tag, Turcio notes his former players have gotten back \$150,000 in athletic scholarships.

Also, six former Bombers have been drafted by Major League Baseball teams and six players on the 18-under team this summer, were either Register All-State or All-Area selections this past high school season.

Then, there are showcases, which are typically a one- or two-day event that draw s countless college coaches and professional scouts, and cost players anywhere from \$200 — for some regional ones — to nearly \$800 for the national ones.

There, players run the 60-yard dash and work out defensively. Hitters take part in batting practice sessions and pitchers either throw a selected amount of pitchers or throw in a modified-game setting.

Most college coaches said they find players they are interested in at a showcase and from there, go watch him in a game.

Michael Esposito, father of Jason Esposito, who starred at Amity and chose to play at Vanderbilt before turning down a \$2.5 million signing bonus from the Kansas City Royals, paid \$5,000 a summer for his son to play for Mark Holtzman's South Florida Bandits, a team put together to play strictly on the showcase circuit. With his son receiving a scholarship to play for the Commodores, a perennial

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college baseball powerhouse, he said his investment paid off and plans on taking the same route next year with his younger son Mark Esposito, who is playing Legion ball now and is headed into his sophomore year at Amity.

"He probably wouldn't be at Vanderbilt," said Esposito, answering a what-if-his-son-played-Legion scenario. "With showcases, the kids are coming to them. The coaches don't have to go see the players. I think it's tough for kids in the Northeast. It's tough for college coaches to come up here."

There has been an explosion of travel teams, tournaments and showcases in the last few years. One notable example is the Perfect Game Championships in East Cobb, Ga, one of the prominent tournaments in the country. Four years ago, 90 teams competed. This year, there were 186.

With the upsurge comes critics.

Some say for every Esposito, there is a young player shelling out hundreds of dollars to play in front of scouts and coaches, despite not having the ability to play at the next level.

Without real game situations, some also question the validity of showcases.

"Running a 60-yard dash is great," Penders said. "I get to see raw speed, but does he run as hard as he can when he runs from first to third? I don't know if you get to see that in a showcase setting. You get to see it in games. You can see a kid fail and how he handles himself in a game situation. Showcases strip that from you."

And for every Connecticut Bombers program, some argue there is another selling kids false hopes.

"A lot of it is diluted and watered-down," Orange Legion coach Bob Mirto said. "There's a money-making motive in it. A lot of people realized it's a good way to make money and they're doing it."

Vieira said he has come across people who weren't satisfied with the coaching, nor the facilities, despite dishing out thousands of dollars. Vieira would not confirm the names of the programs.

North Haven Legion coach Charles Flanagan is another critic of travel baseball, for high school-age players. For the younger players, he says, it's an effective learning tool.

"Players get conned," said Flanagan. "Players hear from someone about programs such as the Bombers or Team Connecticut. They'll pay 3,000 plus to get, quote unquote, good experience. People get infatuated with this stuff. But the level of play isn't there. It's an unstructured environment. Legion is much more structured."

Penders says with the inadequate number of scholarships available for Division I baseball, he is forced to recruit the best player that can afford to play for the Huskies, not necessarily the best player.

That situation, along with all the money being poured into showcases and travel teams, are reasons why, Penders says, baseball is becoming a "white-collar" sport.

But what about the kids and their families who can't afford to dish out several hundred dollars for a showcase or several thousand to play for a travel team?

Bob Hetu, a director of Team Connecticut and Connecticut's chairman for Amateur Athletic Union baseball says his travel team hosts fundraising events and gathers sponsors. Turcio funds some players himself. Jimmy Clark, owner and operator of Blue Chip, a program that hosts showcases, said he offers scholarships based on recommendations. And college coaches will argue, regardless of the financial situation, if a player is talented he will be spotted.

"The world of recruiting is as hard as it's ever been," Quinnipiac coach Dan Gooley said. "But you have to go look under the rocks and behind the trees to find players. Whether you play Legion or in showcases, whether you have \$5,000 or five cents, it doesn't matter, we'll find you."

Meanwhile, Vieira is perplexed by the idea that Legion baseball is being overlooked. A rich history. A state title. Why would a player pass that up, he asks.

Others share his view.

"American Legion baseball has been around for 85 years," Mirto said. "You play at home, you play with kids from your own community and the competition is tremendous."

Compared to travel and showcase baseball, Legion players pay on average \$300 for a typical 35-game season, plus any additional tournaments in which teams choose to play. For some teams, there is no charge.

While there has been a drastic increase in the amount of showcases and travel teams, there has also been an expansion in the Legion

landscape. Over the last five years, there has been the addition of 60 new junior Legion teams in the state and 12 senior Legion teams.

Flanagan said the majority of the players from North Haven's varsity team suited up for him this past Legion season.

But at the same time, Mirto said he only had one starter from Amity's varsity team this season, something unusual for his program. Branford, which reached the American Legion World Series in 2005 and won the state tournament in 2007, lost a player this season to travel baseball and another who said he had to prepare for showcases.

"I can't imagine a better venue than for a kid to play 45 games with his friends in front of college coaches," Branford coach Rich Balzano said. "That's the best venue for him to be seen. Not going to four showcases at \$600 or \$700 and run a 60-yard dash and take five swings. I don't see the benefit of that versus grinding it out and compiling some season long statistics and battling against the better players in the area."

Ryan Maghini who starred at Hand this past spring and is headed to Fordham after receiving a scholarship, plays on the Madison Legion team. He said playing with his friends and having the opportunity to win a state title is something he did not want to pass up.

However, Maghini did note Fordham became interested after seeing him at a showcase.

Turcio says Legion baseball has borders and that takes away from its competitiveness when weighing it to travel and showcase baseball.

And that is just one of the many reasons why the summer baseball scene appears to be changing.

"I think there are a lot of good qualities in American Legion baseball," Clark said. "But most kids want to get out in front of people more and travel more. I think that's where things are moving."

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