

The initial goal was simple: To make the playing field just a bit leveler for the average child just starting sports and learning the games and to teach the game, sportsmanship and pride of participation. They never intended to cut into anyone’s turf. They never envisioned that they would be a premier player in the Philadelphia youth sports scene and they never went into the venture thinking to eliminate a league of any kind. They were merely looking to make things better for the average athlete at a couple of youth organizations in the lower northeast section of Philadelphia and to teach kids the sport while just letting them have fun. The history of the Northeast Peanut League can be compared to a snowball rolling down the hill and as it gains momentum it grew increasing larger as it picked up member clubs along the way.

In the late 70’s the Department of Recreation and the Devlin Leagues were among the prime baseball organizations in the city. Many club had other kids in their organizations generally play in house or in the NEAT, the Northeast Athletic Teams. The NEAT was a league with very little formal rules, no all star game or league championship awards. If you didn’t play Rec. or Devlin you played in house or NEAT.

The equipment of in house was usually well worn or hand me downs whereas the advanced player teams always received the better equipment and uniforms. Many times the equipment was in terrible shape. In house consisted of T-shirts and many times you found yourself buying equipment with money out of your own pocket or in the case of Frank Spatocco, sewing catcher’s mitts so they could be used in 1979.

This was the impetus that started Frank Spatocco in late 1979 or early 1980 to call on Rory Tees of the Holmesburg Boys Club. Having met Rory at a meeting of several local groups earlier they met to discuss their in house programs. They decided to not just play in house but to play against each other in a traveling league. There were many hurdles to overcome but both gentlemen decided the kids and their clubs would be worth the added effort. One problem was the ages. Franks Lansing was primarily 5 and 6 year olds with a few 7 year olds. Rory and Holmesburg had kids from 5 through 9 years old. Still the plan was for the kids to “just have fun”. After seeking permission from both Holmesburg and Lansing to form this “intra league” with their boards, both organizations gladly gave the go ahead for the venture.

So Frank drafted some simple rules and simple schedule and just let the kids play while they were being taught the basics of the game. That first year the kids primarily, the kids just hit off a T with one coach in the field to direct and assist the players. Parents couldn’t help but note the small kids running the bases and Frank started referring to them “little peanuts”. By now Mr. Spatocco was feeling pretty good about their first season and its progress and decided he wanted to put a name to the agreement they had forged. Rory Tees told him basically “Call it what you want you orchestrated the thing”. Hence the Appropriation of the “Northeast” from the NEAT and the Northeast Peanut League was formed!

That spring of 1980 saw each club put in three teams each and agreed to play within their organizations and to travel to each others fields to compete. A seven game season saw both clubs keeping standings and a first championship that would ultimately follow.

Holmesburg was the much stronger club and won that championship pretty handily. Now you have to remember that a lot of emphasis is placed on winning at any level of competition. Both clubs principals (Frank & Rory) purchase trophies for their teams. Both men planned on giving them out at a later date which would include a pizza party for the kids. After that championship game some of the kids took losing to heart and were crying and some of the parents were a bit upset at this. It was then that Frank decided to give his trophies out to his kids right then and there on the field. Rory Tees thought this was a “great idea” and proceeded to do the same. Parents also liked this idea. Hence a tradition that still exists today in all NEPL championship events in that both teams receive an award after the game at an on the field presentation. A tradition was born! To date no other league does this.

In 1981 Frank assumed the Presidency at Lansing but still kept the Peanut League alive and instituted the Lansing Family Fun Day. 1981 also saw the league modify the age groups in that 5/6 and 7/8 age divisions only. Rory Tees had stepped down from Holmesburg so it looked like the league was losing a bit of its newborn stability. Frank was left shorthanded. With 2 divisions a new set of rules were developed which would see coaches pitching in the older bracket. The league would also have to have some help. At a meeting of prominent pols Frank spoke of the new league and in some cases was vehemently opposed by some members of organizations who felt that another league was not necessary. Frank spoke of the leagues concept of the simple notion of “Simply having fun” while learning. He noted that average kids deserved the same recognition and accolades as the older more accomplished athletes. Frank saw the need for championships and all star games, better uniforms, trophies and equipment.

Frank seemed to win the interest of at least one person at that meeting. Bob Feeney of the Mayfair Athletic Club liked what he’s heard and Bob mentioned that MAC would be interested in putting some teams in the NEPL. Frank, being shorthanded, with the loss of Rory Tees asked Bob if he would be interested not only in joining but lending a hand. Bob wholeheartedly agreed. A ten game season saw the NEPL starting to get a little notice and in early 1982 Frank went club to club “door to door” preaching the mantra of the Northeast Peanut League.

Expansion was quicker than they could have imagined. While looking to add the 9/10 year old division the league ballooned from 8 to 20 teams in ’81. Penn Academy, Leo’s Lions and Crispin Gardens joined the NEPL camp and the first board of directors was formed. Frank Spatocco of Lansing, Bob Feeney of MAC, Jim Torpey of Crispin, Jim Rogers of Penn Academy Darius Graziani of Leo’s Lions and they even managed to convince Rory Tees of Holmesburg to come back and join the board. The NEPL with a board of directors, 20 teams and 3 age groups was gathering speed. Just think about that aforementioned snowball. In 1983 they stuck with the 3 age brackets but were also

joined by the Mayfair Shamrocks and Wissinoming Boys Club. Word was starting to spread like wildfire.

In 1985 the Northeast Athletic Teams (NEAT) folded and the NEPL saw themselves adding the 11-12 year old divisions as a matter of necessity and they picked up the remainder of their clubs pushing membership to about 40 teams. Between 1985 and 1988 the NEPL continued its growth spurt by expanding their programs to include girl’s softball and basketball.

Now some on the NEPL board were extremely hesitant when it came to expansion to Softball & Basketball as these board members coached in those other leagues, but the NEPL was intent on expanding its program and not going to be “just a boy’s baseball league”. They enlisted Rick Gaffney of the Holy Terrors organization to assume the duties of Commissioner as Rory Tees remained as Treasurer.

Rules were written and a softball program was enacted as a league in 1988.

As the softball session gained more exposure and gain more teams the League watched as one of the competitors for those same softball teams, the IGSL, dissolved in 1990. The NEPL was like a hungry lioness feeding her cubs and began aggressively sponsoring coaching clinics, with colleges their coaches and vendors displaying their merchandise at these clinics. They were innovative and determined to succeed. They started thinking like the little engine that could and by 1991 with over 30 organizations the league boasted 150 baseball teams and over 50 softball teams and over 150 basketball teams for both boys and girls.

As the League grew Frank realized politics would also play an important role in the leagues survival and finances and while their venue continued to get notice he began with introductions to John Perzel, Joan Krajewski as well as Department of Recreation personnel and others. Still some people from the organizations tried their best to crush the NEPL out of its short existence using ad hoc groups like the President’s Association by making promises to provide funding for the smaller programs at clubs, better assistance from the Philadelphia Department of Recreation with mowing of grass, the removal of dirt and such. They would push the D.O.R. to create their own new league. They wholeheartedly endorse other leagues over the NEPL.

The baby was growing and by 1998 the NEPL had seen NEAT, IGSL and now the Phil-Del Leagues disappear from the scene. Apparently the NEPL had found its niche by providing a viable, worthwhile, well run program of sports. Baseball hit over 250 teams. Softball hit the century mark with 100 teams in just 10 years. Expansion was mind boggling as we started with 90 kids now were pushing 5000 year round with soccer and field hockey also offered. The NEPL Board also grew to 17 members with most putting in 12 or more years of service.

The NEPL’s expansion and growth were not all business. There was a personal touch of the members who took upon themselves the day to day duties of improving and

developing the league. According to Frank they also had fun. Board meetings were sometimes three hours in length and then they would still sometimes go to a bar to continue discussing league business. They were in constant contact with each other almost on a daily basis. No e-mails back then it was done in person or on the phone. These was a sense of togetherness, because quite literally they were together or in constant contact. New Year’s parties spent making basketball schedules, huge sheets of paper with gym times and enlisting the spouses into the mix. It was fun and exciting as these members became good friends and grew to care for each other, the league and what it represented. It became a labor of love.

Board members wore many hats and the modern day rules of each sport were developed and amended over the years and today still bear the signature of former Sports Director Bob Hutchinson, the current Gold, Silver Bronze alignment was developed by then Baseball commissioner, Mike Myers, a fifteen year veteran who spent ten seasons as the commissioner. Scenes like Jim Madden and John Arthin, the architect of our current basketball program scouring over huge sheets of paper matching teams with gym times like generals directing an on field battle plan.

An untold cast of characters and more importantly *People of Character* like Bob Blecker, Ed Mack, The late Tina Soncini-Myers our first Softball umpire director, Jim Rogers and the Father of the Holy Terrors, the late Pat Bickel. The aforementioned Bob Hutchinson who was the Leagues very first Sports Director, left in 1988 to start the Philadelphia Spirit Tournament Softball Team.

The league has also found that with rapid growth there was a need to supply all these games with genuine officials. Previously parents and coaches were enlisted as arbiters. The League also used officials from Metro and Jones official’s services but we were covering only about sixty percent of our games when Bob Feeney raised a question to the board. “Why couldn’t we have our own officials? They would be trained by us, answer to us and more importantly work for us”. So the NEPL Umpire Association was born.

Bob Feeney was the father of the NEPL Officials Organization a group of trained baseball, softball and basketball officials. Bob had to learn some rules himself and He and Frank began attending clinics workshops and purchasing VHS tapes. Bob began studying rules and became a walking textbook able to many times spout rules from memory. Bob undertook the job of training, testing, critiquing and ultimately directing and assigning them without though of remuneration of any kind. The recruiting of trained officials to teach and work along with recruitment of rookies to join the association was strictly Bob’s job and he was fanatical about it.

The organization is quickly approaching 30 years in longevity and has only seen three Presidents, Frank Spatocco of course until 2000 followed by Roz McBride-Stilfield and since 2004 or current President, Frank Connelly a testament to its stability and consistency.

As we mentioned earlier, at one time the league included soccer in under 8, under 10 and under 12 divisions and field hockey for five seasons but the signature was baseball and then softball and basketball and here is where the leagues volunteers showed their strength putting on Annual All Star events. All Games are individually overseen by a Division Director reporting to the Sports Director and NEPL Board. Assuming all the duties of gathering names, breaking down teams, preparing the program and scheduling and selecting game officials.

The first All Star game started in 1983 at Penn Academy. Crispin Garden probably holds the record for hosting the most of the Baseball/Softball days but it was scattered among our other member clubs like Wissinoming, Parkwood, Mayfair A.C. & Somerton, Bustleton and Fox Rok. Currently the event is being held over the weekend of June 14, 2008 with a few Friday games. For the second consecutive year the event will be hosted by the Torresdale Boys Club.

Each year the NEPL also recognizes its players by awarding prizes for our Annual Essay Contest and the coveted *Philadelphia Union League Good Citizenship Awards* to six members. Frank came up with the idea for the Essay contest when his desire to turn the all star day into an extravaganza with more than just games

The NEPL had to first undergo much scrutiny by the Union League. Background checks, references and a vote of approval by the Philadelphia Union League got the NEPL three Youth Works Committee nominations in 1996. In 1946, the Union League established the Committee on Youth Work to demonstrate its motto, "Love of Country Leads," and to motivate young people in the 14-17 age group to set high personal standards of behavior and leadership as they mature into responsible citizens. In 1971, Youth Work was formalized by the creation of a trust known today as The Youth Work Foundation of the Union League of Philadelphia. Today the NEPL selects six of its members to receive this prestigious award.

This event became more special in March of 1998 when one of our players, young Joey Casey of Mayfair A.C., was taken from us suddenly. That same year the Annual All Star Event took on a new title, The Joey F. Casey Memorial All Star Day. Each year this child is remembered reverently in our most prestigious award the Joey F. Casey award. Who other than Bob Feeny would be the first recipient?

In 2008 we're marking our 25th All Star Event with our 10th anniversary of remembering Joey Casey who represents all children with our second consecutive year at the Torresdale Boy Club. This is a special day not only for our kids but for the league as a whole. It's our day to celebrate our past, present and future. When Our Stars Come Out, We Shine!

Joey F. Casey, Jr.
Memorial Award
*He, a Child of God, Pure Spirit and Innocent,
is now His Messenger, a Guardian Angel*
We Dedicate To Joey As
"One of the Good Guys!"
(Recipient Name)
For all your dedication and commitment to children everywhere.
We remember the unselfishness and gentle kindness shown
to others so less fortunate
With Love and Admiration
Date

Just to let you know, the inscription of the Casey Award was written by Frank Spatocco.

As we close we wish to mention Frank Spatocco’s aspirations for the future of the league. As a founder almost thirty years ago Frank has in his words said “I’ve had a blast! It’s been a tremendous adventure with family and friends and has enjoyed the time spent with people who worked relentlessly and with pride and accomplishment for what the league stands for, simply Equality, Sportsmanship, Learning and Fun!”

Remember, it’s the Northeast Peanut League, “Ain’t Nuttin Like It Anywhere”