

HISTORY OF DOWNINGTOWN LITTLE LEAGUE

In the Beginning

During the post-war period in Downingtown, several of the service clubs and groups were formed to help improve community life. One such group, the Downingtown Little League, was formed on June 30, 1950 by Dr. George W. Bousum, Charles P. Emery, Ted Griffith, Robinson McIlvaine, R. Vinton Smedley and Francis H. Tweed. These men were interested in creating a youth sports program to accommodate the many boys, ages nine to twelve that were playing sand-lot baseball in the borough and surrounding area.

Dr. Bousum, who was a friend of Carl Stotz, the founder of Little League Baseball, was elected the first President of the new league. The other elected officers were Francis Tweed - Vice President, Charles Emery – Secretary and Vinton Smedley – Treasurer. Dr. Bousum took the group of men to Williamsport, PA to begin the formation and foundation of the program for Downingtown. Upon their return, eventually 20-30 men got involved in coaching and umpiring the boys in the first few years. The vacant lot at the southwest corner of Pennsylvania and Manor Avenues, where the boys played some of their pick-up games was starting to look like a real ballpark with the installation of a backstop, dugouts, scoreboard and fence around the new field in 1950. The community noticed the hard work, dedication and leadership of the volunteers during that first summer and they were willing to sponsor the four new teams. The original sponsors were Pepperidge Farm, Inc., St. Anthony's Lodge, Loyal Order of the Moose and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Pepperidge, St. Anthony's and Moose have been continuous and are current sponsors in our league, since 1950. The VFW sponsors American Legion baseball teams.

The first tryouts were in the summer of 1949 and the spring of 1950 with 160 boys coming from the borough, Caln, East Bradford and West Whiteland Townships to show off their skills. Unfortunately, there were only 12 spots each on the four new teams. In 1951-52, Howard Caskey took the lead in forming a Minor League. This league consisted of four additional teams that allowed more boys a chance to play baseball and to help support the four original Major League teams. On April 29, 1950 a group of kids selected from the four new teams traveled to Hammonton, NJ to play in a televised exhibition game. Our home-townners stunned the 1949 National Champions by beating them on their home field. The first official games of the new league were played on Saturday, June 10, 1950 and drew a crowd of approximately 400 spectators that lined the sloping grassy bank on Pennsylvania Ave. The inaugural opening day ceremony featured musical selections by the Downingtown High School Band, led by Ed Irwin. Father Daniel Hoy, a director of the league and Rector of St. Joseph's Church gave the invocation and spoke of the principles of Little League Baseball. The other officers and the sponsors were introduced and National President Carl Stotz was the guest speaker. The band played the National Anthem as the American Flag was raised up for the first time on the newly installed flagpole in centerfield. Burgess (Mayor) Leo Hamilton threw

in the first ball and the league was off and running. Downingtown was the first Little League program in Chester County, followed by Coatesville and West Chester in 1951 and 1952. Dr. Bousum was appointed Field Director of the Philadelphia District by the national office in Williamsport. He would travel around southeastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey talking to civic groups about the benefits of Little League Baseball. During 1950, Downingtown was one of only six leagues in the Philadelphia District. The other leagues were Eastern Delaware County (Upper Darby), Chester East, Central, West and Norristown.

The First Game and Season

Pepperidge played Moose in the inaugural game on that special day. John Chilla (his son John and grandson John also played in DLL) pitched a five hit gem to give the Farmers a 5 – 3 victory over the Moose. For the first three innings the game looked like a pitcher's duel between Chilla and Mike Sciarretta of Moose who both struck out batter after batter. Pepperidge's Don Mull drew the honor of scoring the first run in league history. The second game of the twin-bill, saw Bill Stringer, catcher for St. Anthony's, with two strikes on him, hit the leagues first home run over the left centerfield fence to help St. Anthony's edge the VFW 8 – 7. Geddy Manzi was the winning pitcher for the Lodge, while Francis Valentino suffered the loss for the Vets.

The first no-hitter was pitched by St. Anthony's Carl Smith against the VFW. Pepperidge was the first season winner with a 20 – 7 record, followed by Moose, St. Anthony's and the VFW. John Chilla was the star of the league with an 8 – 1 pitching record and .500 batting average with a league leading four home runs. Carl Smith's .544 batting average was tops in the league.

The 1950 All Star team included Chilla, Sciarretta, Valentino, Stringer, Mull, Smith, Nip Westmoreland, Robert Thomas, Harry Watson, Tom Woodward, Joe Mingione, Don Miley, Lloyd Price and Robert Hamilton. The alternates were Ed Aumiller, Larry Dampman, Bill Davis and Jim Charles. At a Pennsylvania regional meeting, National President Carl Stotz recommended that the District 4 finals be played in Downingtown. He said, "Downingtown has the best field in the Philadelphia area".

The Papertowners traveled to Upper Darby for its first ever playoff game. They were amazed at the field conditions that they were to play the game on and the large size of the opponents. It was rough and without a backstop, fence and dugouts. However, that did little to stop our boys as they beat Eastern Delaware County 4 – 3. After the game the lads were treated to sandwiches and shakes at the Guernsey Cow in Exton on the way home. In the District semi-final game our boys lost a close one in Norristown by a score of 2 – 1. The final game, played in Downingtown, had Chester Central blanking Norristown 8 – 0 to advance to the Regional playoffs in Harrisburg. After that final game our four local teams played exhibition games with the other visiting leagues, on our field.

Time for Growth

The league continued to grow throughout the 1950's and 60's. St. Joseph's Elementary School was being planned to be built at Pennsylvania and Manor Avenues. Therefore, the ball players moved to the current location on the westside of Manor Ave., between Race St. and the Beaver Creek. This land was donated to the league by G.O. Carlson in 1954. One completely fenced in field was built with a two dugouts and a scoreboard. There was also a small garage for equipment storage that was constructed behind the backstop. In the summer of 1965 Field 2 was built and an addition was put onto the garage for a concession stand, commonly referred to as the "Shack". Our Major League sponsors in the 1960's were Pepperidge Farm, St. Anthony's, Moose, Downingtown National Bank, AACO and Steelworkers Local 4588. Some of the Minor League sponsors were Downingtown Wallpaper & Paint, Warren Pontiac, Rotary Club, Optimist Club, Coffee Cup and Charles News Agency. In the late 1970's Field 3 was added due to the increased number of players participating in the league. In the 70's and 80's there were seven Major League and nine Minor League teams. Our All Star teams in those years were very competitive in the District tournaments. Our territory included the borough, East Caln, southern Uwchlan, East Brandywine, West Bradford and part of Wallace Townships.

Softball in Downingtown existed as a separate girl's only organization, just as Little League baseball was for boys only, until the mid 1970's. The Downingtown Softball League was formed in 1973 - 74 with Tony Poluch as the first President. They had three teams in the beginning and conducted their own registration and fundraisers. One of the first sponsors of the league was J.W. Maxwell & Son Hardware. The teams played their games at Beaver Creek and East Ward Elementary Schools. The league grew rapidly in the 70's and 80's. In 1985, Co-Presidents Gary and Rita Arnold approached DLL about adding softball to the league and adopting their softball league. DLL accepted the league, and at that time, Field 4 was built for softball. In 1993, President Bob Holden and Vice President Doug Prescott proposed to the Board of Directors that Field 1 be used primarily as a softball field. After a lengthy and spirited debate by the Board, it was agreed to use Field 1 for softball. And, the newly formed Tee Ball and Pee Wee League (ages 5 - 7) would use Field 4. The Tee Baller's and Pee Wee's were then moved to the new Field 5 in 2001 when the two Minor League baseball teams needed two fields to play on.

Modern Times

In the late 1990's the league adopted the use of the professional baseball team names and uniform shirts for all of the teams. Each team would continue to have a sponsor printed on the back of the shirts with a professional team name and logo on the front. An example would be the St. Anthony's Phillies or the Downingtown National Bank Diamondbacks. By doing this, it saved the league considerable money in printing customized uniforms. At that time the Minor league divisions were renamed to mirror the professional leagues: "A" (ages 6, 7), "AA" (ages 8, 9) and "AAA" (ages 10, 11, 12).

With the Major league (ages 10, 11, 12) continuing to be called the Majors. With the league growing throughout the 90's, a batting cage to be used by all of the divisions was constructed. Fencing and backstops around each of the fields were replaced, new sod for the infields was installed, catcher's equipment and batters helmets were replaced and the small 1954 dugouts at Field 1 were replaced with larger dugouts in 1999. The construction of the new Field 1 dugouts was completed mostly by volunteers from our softball teams with the leadership of Erik Feist and Erik Needles.

In 2000 the Downingtown Babe Ruth League Baseball (ages 13 – 15), established in 1952, merged with DLL after all of the other Chester County Babe Ruth leagues, except for Downingtown and Phoenixville switched to the Little League program. DLL now offers Junior League (ages 13 – 14), Senior League (ages 14-15) and Big League (ages 16, 17 and 18). These games are played at Kerr Park and Downingtown Middle School. Also in 2000 the DLL Band made its first public performance at the Opening Day Festivities. The band featured our own athletes who also play instruments. The first band, led by James "Pete" Snyder, played the National Anthem just as the high school band did on that special day in 1950. The band has played at every Opening Day since 2000 and is currently led by Judy Houdeshel, conductor of the Downingtown Middle School Band.

The band added "God Bless America" to their repertoire on Saturday, May 4, 2002. This was the day that Little League Baseball, Inc. designated as "Honoring our Hometown Heroes". This was a result of the terrorist attack on our country on September 11, 2001 and the thought was that the community should honor its own heroes and volunteers. On that day, the league honored our league volunteers who also are volunteer firefighters in our community. They were Wes Pannebaker and Jeff Stevens – Alert Fire Co. No. 1, Mark Brunstetter – Minquas Fire Co. No. 2 and Don Taylor – Thorndale Fire Co. There were approximately 75 members of the Downingtown Fire and Police Departments along with their apparatus at the ceremony. Christopher Keen – Alert, Thomas E. Lee, III – Minquas, Michael Dunn – Police (all DLL alumni) threw in the first balls of the day.

In 2001 the 10 Year Old International Softball All Star team won the District 28 championship and made it to the semi-final game of the Section 5 tournament. In 2003 the 11-12 Year Old International Baseball All Star team lost the District final game in extra innings. The 15 year old All Star team, under direction of Mike Doyle and Mark Schwarz, won the District 28 title in 2007 at the Fenstermacher Tournament.

Improvement to the facility and fields is on ongoing project. In 2003 a much needed new roof was installed by volunteers on the Shack and the infield grass was removed from Fields 1 and 4. This provides better rainwater drainage and it now makes Field 1 a true softball field.

With the older programs now under the Little League banner, in 2005 a field was constructed for the Junior, Senior, and Big League players. Now all of the league's home games could be played at G.O. Carlson fields. This enabled the young players to be able to watch the "big boys" play as their games ended, and for the older guys to be right there

to encourage the younger ones to keep playing hard. In 2008, the dugout at this field were built by Kyle Thatcher as part of his Eagle Scout project.

In the same year, Ryan Doyle, as part of his high school graduation project, helped construct a new batting cage; a second batting cage was added in 2009. Dugouts were built on Field 5, the Pee Wee field, by local boy scouts in 2008.

Remembering

Over the years, donations have been made to the league in memory of family members and former players. Trees have been planted and equipment has been purchased to pay tribute to those who have come before. As part of the 60th season celebration on April 4, 2009 a memorial was dedicated to remember former players. Thanks to Steve Reynolds and his crew from The Witmer Group, the memorial was built with funds donated in memory of Matthew Ciarlone, a young man who lost his life in 2009 to leukemia. In Matt's memory, a bench was added to field 3 and other renovations are being planned. Mario Carbone, father and grandfather to coach John Carbone and his sons, also had a bench on field 3 added in his memory.

Speaking to the player to score the first run in the 1950 season, Don Mull told us there were no organized sports in Downingtown up until that first tryout. Don says, "It was unbelievable – all of us boys waiting to be chosen for our teams. It was great!"

The reminiscent smile on Don's face 60 years later is the same smile of the all the boys and girls who walk up to home plate at ages 5, 8, 10, 12 and 16, adjust their bat, get ready for the pitch, and hope and dream that this will be their moment!

To the group of men in 1950 who had a vision for the youth of Downingtown, the many, many individuals who kept that dream going, to those generations of families who have watched their children and grandchildren play Little League ball in Downingtown, and to those who moved here and became part of that family, we pay tribute and say thank you for a wonderful 60 years!

Compiled by Jeffrey S. Stevens June, 2004
Updated by Diane Sweeney April, 2009

Information from John Bousum, Robert Stevens, Ken Klunk, John Bowman, Don Mull and many others.