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Columnists

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Your shot at Wiffle ball immortality



Rich Carrasco gets ready to swing away in the Wiffle Ballin' For Kids tournament in Mishawaka.

COMMENTARY

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Scott Ermeti will be coming all the way from Los Angeles to play Wiffle ball in his bare feet and in his old stomping grounds.

Larry Grau, now of Indianapolis, most likely will have a cigar perched in his mouth when he takes the field at Mishawaka's Rose Park on July 29-30.

Scott Wilcoxson, of Jeffersonville, won't let a little shoulder surgery stop him from returning to the diamond after a diving attempt for a hit last year sent him to the hospital.

This is serious stuff, after all.

OK, it's not that serious, but it is something that hundreds of kids -- ages 10 to 60-plus -- look forward to every year in Mishawaka.

It's the Wiffle Ballin' For Kids tournament -- formerly known as the World Whiffleball Championship -- with the proceeds going to The Children's Campus of the Family & Children's Center in Mishawaka.

"We're hoping to get about 72 teams this year," said Rich Carrasco, who helps run the tournament with his Family & Children's Center supervisor, Chad Miller.

Rich watched the first tournament in 1980 as an 11-year-old.

"They wouldn't let me play that year," he said.

But he has competed almost every year since then and inherited the leadership reins several summers ago from tournament founders Jim Bottorff and Larry Grau.

At one point, the tournament went to an invitation-only format, but it is now back to being open to everyone -- while serving a good cause, too.

"And for the first time, we are having a fun division along with the competitive division," Rich added.

It's pretty much fun for everyone, though.

The tournament assures entrants of at least four games, and Rose Park can accommodate as many as 22 fields.

For those of you thinking about swinging that yellow plastic bat for the fences, here are some of the Wiffle Ballin' For Kids rules:

- Five players make up a team, but only four can be on the field -- usually a pitcher, catcher and two outfielders.
- It's pitcher's hand -- which means if a batted ball is returned to the pitcher before the batter gets to first base, he's out.
- Only swinging strikes count, and there are no walks. Pitching is overhand and slow.
- No lead-offs, and the only base you can steal is home.
- Pegging -- hitting a base runner below the neck when he is between bases -- counts as an out.
- No umpires are used and team captains work out any disputes. If an agreement can't be reached, then a "do over" -- repeating the play -- is used.

The fields use the regular outfield fences on Rose Park's diamonds for home runs with the distances being 85 feet to dead center and 100 feet down both lines.

"And even if a guy hits a foul ball over the fence, we count it since that has to be quite a poke," Rich added.

Even though some teams come in from around the Midwest, most participants are local or have local ties.

"A lot of us grew up with the tournament," Rich said. "In fact, my family uses it as a reason to have a family reunion."

Rich, whose dog is named Wiffle and whose license plate reads WIFLS, said they are still looking for more teams, although the first deadline is Monday.

The Children's Campus recreation program, which will benefit from the proceeds, helps emotionally disturbed children and their families achieve their full potential through therapeutic residential and community-based services.

"We just want people to go out there in the tournament and remember what it's like to be a kid again," Rich said.

White balls. Yellow bats. Short fences. Great memories.

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