

Mauldin resolves to cure ailing baseball program



John Barwick, athletic director for Mauldin Parks and Recreation, conducts a tryout for coach-pitch baseball players . KEN OSBURN/CONTRIBUTOR

By Eric Connor
Tribune-Times Writer
ec Connor@greenvillenews.com

There was a time when if youth recreation baseball leagues in the Upstate wanted to win championships, they had to go through Mauldin.

That time has passed — by more than a decade.

Player participation in the Mauldin recreation league has

dropped by more than half in five years. Games periodically end early because there's nobody to turn the lights on. Umpires show up late or not at all, leaving coaches in the uncomfortable position to officiate their own games.

The softball program has disappeared. Players have moved to costly pay-to-play tournament baseball, where once upon a time, playing in a

rec league was enough. The high school features fewer and fewer players who have spent their formative years in Mauldin rec.

And on either side of the city stand state-of-the-art ballparks that outshine Mauldin rec's older fields where the same holes in the same fences have existed for years.

These were the blunt, hard-to-stomach observations that

coaches, former players and longtime boosters in the program gathered recently to share in a community meeting convened at the Ray Hopkins Senior Center.

The gathering was called by the city to air the concerns of a community that prides itself on its passion for America's pastime.

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The theme was clear: Mauldin rec baseball isn't what it once was.

However, once two hours of sobering discussion had passed, another theme emerged: The program must return to its former glory.

"I think if we all pull together, we can get this back on track, we can pull this thing out the ditch," said Bill Wingo, a former Clemson University second baseman whose three sons came up through Mauldin rec.

One son, Scott Wingo, went on to become one of the University of South Carolina's most-storied players, a second baseman himself who in 2010 scored the winning run in what would be the Gamecocks' first of two back-to-back national championships.

"It all started here," Bill Wingo said.

Another son — Brad Wingo, who played baseball for USC Upstate — coaches Mauldin youth teams today although he has no children in the league.

But, he said, "The buzz is gone."

City leaders were present more to listen than to offer answers, and at the end solicited community volunteers to serve on an improvement committee.

"I'm dedicated to making whatever changes need to be made," said newly elected City Councilman Taft Matney, who heads the city's recreation committee.

"We know how to do



A young athlete winds up for the throw during a baseball tryout in Mauldin. KEN OSBURN/CONTRIBUTOR

it," Mayor Dennis Raines said. "We've just got to get back to it."

Just five years ago, there were 2,200 children playing baseball through Mauldin rec, but that number has slipped to about 1,000.

There is no one reason for the drop in participation, but rather a collection of factors, said coaches, parents and supporters.

Today, success is being measured in how many kids are signing up, but many players have been lost over the past several years to thriving leagues like those in Simpsonville, Greenville and Northwood.

"We're letting too many kids leave this pro-

gram and go elsewhere," said William Sentelle, who coaches and once played in the league. "It's not about how many people are signing up today. It's about how many people we let out the back door."

Matt Bynum, who has coached his three sons in Mauldin, said that leadership within the program has been a steadily worsening problem.

"The leadership in Mauldin rec is waning when it comes to baseball," Bynum said. "We need people who are present. We need people who are forthright, people who are outgoing and outspoken and not afraid to be present and active in the organization itself."

In 2012, Mauldin cut ties with the multi-state Dixie Youth Baseball organization, as did Fountain Inn. The disaffiliation eliminated the selection of All-Star teams, which as recently as five years ago were advancing into regional playoffs.

In its place, Mauldin and Fountain Inn joined Simpsonville — which disaffiliated itself from the national Little League Baseball organization — to create a Golden Strip coalition, with an end-of-season tournament that involves all three leagues instead of All-Star teams.

The factors involved in the decision were concerns over franchise fees related to Dixie Youth and a desire to "be better partners" with neighboring leagues, Mauldin Recreation Director Van Brannon said.

"It's definitely not off the table to go back," Brannon said.

Frequently, All-Star teams will break off from the league and transform into so-called "travel baseball" teams that participate in pay-to-play weekend tournaments.

However, teams oftentimes travel no farther than Heritage Park in Simpsonville or Conestee Park in Greenville, where rec leagues are flourishing with players who participate in league and weekend tournament play.

Mauldin High's baseball coach, Jim Maciejewski, said that fewer players are coming into the high school program from Mauldin rec.

"I think we're using travel baseball as an excuse for why our rec

league can't flourish," Maciejewski said. "This is a baseball community. This should be the prototype of what a rec league should be."

Maciejewski said overtures to the rec league to coordinate — such as conducting coaching clinics — have been "pushed away."

"If we can develop coaches in these rec leagues, we can develop players," Maciejewski said.

Brad Wingo said that the league doesn't maximize the use of its fields, when sometimes games can run until 10 p.m. with only one of four fields being used.

Last spring, a regular season lasted only eight games, and players would go more than a week without playing, said Greg Rice, a Mauldin rec coach.

The league has its advantages, participants said.

The cost is low — \$75 for city residents, \$95 out of city — and older neighborhood parks like Springfield Park with its natural mounds and infield grass are charming to those who aren't enamored with the newer sports complexes.

Councilman Larry Goodson said that the Mauldin City Council recently approved spending \$750,000 to replace ball field lighting.

The city is trying to limit the light installation's impact on baseball's opening day a month from now. However, Goodson said that once installed, lights can be turned on from a far-away, remote location if need be.