



Randy Frankel welcomes players and their families to the 1987 season opener for the league now known as the Squirrel Hill Baseball Association. Newly appointed as head of the league, Frankel had convinced a local television station to fly its news helicopter over the field the night before to dry it out after heavy rains.

A Ballpark Figure

Randy Frankel has been the heart and soul of Squirrel Hill Baseball for 30 years.

BY HILARY DANINHIRSCH

What would you do if you were expecting hundreds of people, including the mayor and local celebrities, for an opening day parade at a baseball field, but the field was muddy due to recent rains? It's obvious: you would call a local news station and ask that their helicopter fly over the area for several hours, so that the downdraft would dry the field.

Wouldn't you? And wouldn't you call them back the next day when the rains came again?

Maybe that solution seems like it's out of left field, but it is how Squirrel Hill Baseball Association Director and President Randy Frankel solved that exact dilemma 30 years ago.

Stepping up to the plate with that type of creative problem-solving is one of many reasons why, for three decades, Frankel has been the beloved face of the community baseball league that has served more than 12,000 children in that timespan.



Squirrel Hill Baseball Association President and Director Randy Frankel sits in a dugout in Squirrel Hill's Frick Park. This year marks his 30th anniversary as head of the community sports organization.

Frankel wears many hats besides a baseball cap. In addition to field-dryer, he's the master scheduler, the phone-call maker, and a mentor for hundreds of players.

Even before he took over as the league's leader in 1987, Frankel was associated with the organization for several years. "It was a natural progression," he says. "I went from interested parent to assistant coach to head coach."

Baseball has always been in Frankel's DNA. He was born on Long Island and was a loyal Giants fan before the team moved to San Francisco. He played baseball as a youth,

even making his local all-star team at one point. Life brought him to Pittsburgh, where he settled in Squirrel Hill while his children were young.

Squirrel Hill Baseball is open to any boy or girl from age 3 to 17, regardless of skill level. Teams are structured on an age-related basis, and many children play in the league for years. Although the majority of players are from Squirrel Hill or other East End communities, there are no residency restrictions. In fact, Frankel notes that about one-third of the current players are from outside of Squirrel Hill.



A young player in the Squirrel Hill Baseball Association league winds up for a pitch on the Stan Lederman Field in Frick Park.

He also accommodates the schedules of roughly 70 Orthodox Jewish children who cannot play on Saturdays. “Otherwise, they would never have had an opportunity to play baseball,” he observes.

Countless children have had that opportunity since the league was founded more

than 50 years ago, under a different name, for boys only. Squirrel Hill attorney Stan Lederman—for whom the Frick Park baseball field is named—was active in bringing girls into the league and served as director for about 15 years until Frankel took over in April 1987.

“I give kudos to Stan and Lynette Lederman, as they were extremely instrumental in the success of the league,” Frankel says.

At one time, Squirrel Hill Baseball was affiliated with the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill, but today it is an independent nonprofit, having achieved 501(c)(3) status in 2003, when the term “association” was added to its full name.

During his tenure, Frankel has greatly expanded the league options, including creating a fall league—the first in the city to do so, though other leagues quickly followed suit. He also co-founded the Pittsburgh East program for children ages 13 to 17, which supplements the traditional league and operates loosely like pick-up games.

Other contributions include developing a girls’ softball team about five years ago, a Junior Pirates league in conjunction with the City of Pittsburgh, a program called Future Stars for ages 6 to 8, and Pony and Colt leagues for ages 13 to 17. The association also offers spring training camps in tandem with the University of Pittsburgh, an exclusive offering for Squirrel Hill Baseball registrants.



Former Pittsburgh Pirates player Neil Walker (in black)—now with the New York Mets—poses with some of Squirrel Hill Baseball’s Junior Pirates. This special appearance took place in 2014.

A Ballpark Figure

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—RANDY FRANKEL

This season, a total of approximately 700 young ballplayers are participating in programs offered by Squirrel Hill Baseball.

For Frankel, the job is not just about baseball, but values and life lessons. “The key is, [players] learn something about sportsmanship,” he says. “Baseball teaches children about teamwork, number one, and how to accept defeat graciously and victories humbly.”

Plus, he adds, “You meet and develop friendships with kids from other communities.”



Standing on the field at PNC Park, Frankel and his son David hold the trophy that David’s Squirrel Hill Baseball team was awarded after winning the 2004 Pittsburgh Big League championship. The citywide competition is sponsored by Citiparks.

Frankel speaks from experience, as all five of his grown children have participated in one way or another. Two sons and one daughter played in the league, and two other children worked their first jobs in concessions. Two of his sons even coached briefly. “It has helped them develop organizational skills and leadership qualities,” he notes.

Frankel says it is rewarding to see second-generation kids play in the same baseball league as their parents. Jeff Margolis, 40, of Squirrel Hill, was on the first Sabbath-

restricted team when he played as a youth under Frankel’s leadership. Margolis now is an assistant director and head coach for some of the teams, and all four of his sons, ranging in age from 12 to 17, play in the league.

“It is really a community-based program,” Margolis says. “Everyone treats each other like family. That is most important to me—that my kids continue the tradition of being a part of the community.” He attributes the association’s success to the continuity provided by Frankel as a stable fixture, especially in a sport with a high volunteer turnover rate. “There is an unbelievable generational continuation,” Margolis observes.

In Frankel’s words, “Parents have comfort in knowing that their children’s lives have been enriched by playing baseball in a safe and friendly environment.” And, he adds, “Not only do the kids make friends, but the parents make friends; all that ties into how the league has been important to the community.”

For his part in supporting that community, Frankel received the Stan and Lynette Lederman Coach of the Year Award in 1985, as well as the Bob O’Connor Lifetime Service Award in 2007. In 2009, he was inducted into the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame of Western Pennsylvania after winning the Ziggy Kahn award, given to honor his contribution to youth sports. Today, he serves on the hall of fame’s board, which works to support youth sports programs in Western Pennsylvania and Israel.

Looking toward the future, Frankel says, “I want to continue to grow the organization by offering new and innovative programs,” referring in part to planned improvements at Lederman Field and community outreach at The Children’s Institute in Squirrel Hill.

“I want to continue to offer programs to make sure our children have fun, most importantly; make new friendships; learn about sportsmanship; and develop new skills,” he adds. “This has been a major part of my life the last 33 years. It makes me feel like I’ve had a positive influence on many children.”

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