

Putting a serious spin on casual backyard pastime Wiffle Ball players head to Stoughton for annual tourney

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It's easy to think of Wiffle Ball as a kid's game, the pastime of lazy summer days. You can play it with just two people -- one to pitch, one to hit -- which makes it ideal for days when friends are away on vacation or at camp. For a game of humble and relatively recent origins, invented in 1953 in a Connecticut backyard by a father and son, Wiffle Ball has become solidly knit into the fabric of America.

But Wiffle Ball has, in recent years, developed another, more serious side.

There are competing Wiffle Ball organizations, and leagues where players wear team uniforms, play a season-long schedule, and vie in national tournaments offering as much as \$10,000 to the winners.

Locally, there are leagues sprouting up in towns such as Randolph, Weymouth, and Bridgewater.

And the New England Wiffle Association will be holding its annual tournament on July 31 in Stoughton, at the West School Athletic Complex on Central Street, with as many as 500 teams involved in two age-based divisions. One tournament will feature teams of players age 15 or younger, and the open division's contests are for everyone else.

"We have players who are over 50," said Erik Newmark, executive director of the New England Wiffle Association.

Wiffle Ball is a game well-suited for players with a few years under their belts, given that its official form involves no base running. Whether a hit is a single, double, or triple is determined by where it lands on the marked field. Like in baseball, over the fence is a home run.

And its rules are relatively simple. Games last for six innings. Two strikes make an out, as do cleanly fielded grounders and fly balls. Four balls are a walk (although nobody actually goes anywhere). The strike zone is a plastic target, measuring 18 inches wide and 27 inches high, perched on a stand behind home plate. If a pitch hits the target, which sits 15 inches above the plate, it is considered a strike.

Pitchers throw from 41 feet away from home plate, and there is a speed limit of 38 miles per hour. If an opposing team complains that the pitcher is throwing too fast, Newmark has a radar gun to check.

Teams typically field three players, but there can be as many as five on a team and as few as one. "We had a one-man team in the tournament a year ago," said Newmark. "There is an advantage. You get to know what the opposing pitcher is throwing because you are up every at bat."

These are nonprofit tournaments, said Newmark, 27, a computer software consultant by profession and a Wiffle Ball executive by passion. A track captain back at Doherty High School in Worcester, Newmark and some friends began the New England Wiffle Association five years ago.

Profits from the youth tournament, after expenses, are donated to the Make A Wish Foundation. The open division tournament, which has an entry fee of \$95 for a three-person team, offers prize money. First place earns \$1,000, runner-up gets \$300, and third place wins \$100.

Newmark expects to set up as many as 40 official Wiffle Ball fields at the West School in Stoughton. Each field is 85 feet deep by 60 feet wide.

Scott Mahan, 23, of Bridgewater, got his first taste of "official" Wiffle Ball action at last year's NEWA tournament, which was played in Sharon before it moving to Stoughton this summer. He's been hooked ever since.

"Some friends, guys I went to Cardinal Spellman High with who are hard-core players, talked me into joining them," said Mahan, who played all sorts of sports, including typical backyard Wiffle Ball games, growing up in Bridgewater. He was good enough in basketball to star for Cardinal Spellman High School in Brockton, and later at Bentley College in Waltham and Wheaton College in Norton.

Mahan said competitive Wiffle Ball "isn't the same as playing with friends in the backyard. It's more competitive, and the pitchers throw better breaking balls."

Last month he launched his own league in Bridgewater, with games on Sunday afternoons from noon until 5 on a field at the George Mitchell Elementary School. Newcomers are welcome to join them, said Mahan.

"We're just getting started. Right now we have three teams. We've been trying to get the word out," said Mahan. "There are notices on the Wiffle Ball sites on the Internet, and I'm sure there are plenty of guys in the Bridgewater area who would like to give it a try."

Paul "Boomer" Coutoumas of Hanson, one of Mahan's friends who introduced him to Wiffle Ball's competitive side, has been a serious player for nearly four years. He thought his days swinging a bat were over after playing baseball at Spellman.

"I went to Bridgewater State College and thought about going out for the baseball team," said the 23-year-old real estate salesman, "but I didn't have time. I wanted to concentrate on my studies. I regretted that decision. I missed it."

That is, until Coutoumas began played Wiffle Ball.

At first, he teamed with friends like Mahan to form the DirtBags, playing in NEWA tournaments. But he has elevated his game to Wiffle Ball warrior status.

These days he travels to Danvers every Sunday to play in the Golden Stick League, the big leagues of Wiffle Ball. His team, the Blues, is ranked third in the nation, and competes in tournaments across the United States.

"There is nothing like it. Everybody has uniforms and it's highly competitive. There are 24 teams in the league, which is divided into two divisions," said Coutoumas. One division is called the Pro League, which consists of the better teams and players. There is also a Prospect League, for developing players.

The league is affiliated with Fast Plastic, a national Wiffle Ball organization, and features rules that make for games very different than NEWA's style of play.

"It's almost like baseball, and there is no speed limit for pitchers," said Coutoumas. "Pitchers throw as hard as they can. Some can get it up to 70 miles an hour."

"I think the Internet has been a boost to Wiffle Ball," said Newmark. "Players from all over the country are able to get together and form leagues and tournaments."

The biggest tournament is the Fast Plastic National Championship in Texas, with teams from across the country competing for the title and its \$10,000 prize.

"It's definitely not the same game you use to play in the backyard," said Coutoumas. ■