

# Your Life



## Every Rhode Island baby

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## Big league Wiffle Ball is serious fun

08:45 AM EDT on Tuesday, August 17, 2004

BY **BRYAN ROURKE**  
Journal Staff Writer



Journal photo / [Bob Breidenbach](#)

**Marc Newmark of the New England Wiffle Association uses a radar gun to clock a pitch by Young Guns' pitcher Jeff Cashman as Derek Gaudini of the R.I. Kings takes a swing.**

SHARON, Mass. -- Someone said something about Wiffle Ball.

Suddenly, a backyard barbecue begins in your brain. A plastic yellow bat appears in your hands. A pitch approaches.

It's coming from a memory.

Hit the house. That's a home run, you recall. So you swing hard, hard enough to return to reality.

On a vast expanse of grass, the recreation fields of Sharon, you see hundreds of people. They listen to music on loudspeakers. And they tell you they're playing Wiffle

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Ball.

But you don't recognize it.

Pitched balls rise ridiculously and fall precipitously. They twist and turn, and curve almost comically as batters begin to swing.

Welcome to the big leagues: the New England Wiffle Association (NEWA).

Here, the sport has graduated from amateurish backyard outings to semi-professional round-robin tournaments, with top prizes of \$1,000.

Saturday, however, Wifflers play for more: bragging rights. NEWA conducts its end-of-the-season tournament in Worcester, which will attract scores of teams, including last year's defending champions: the Rhode Island Kings, who come from Burrillville.

In this early August tournament in Sharon, the Kings are like cats playing with mice. They're toying with their early, overmatched opponents, who have no idea they're being toyed with.

All they know is Derik Gaudini, 22, a mechanical engineering student at the University of New Hampshire, is throwing pitches they seldom hit. Little do they know, the ace is in the outfield.

Nick Tariela, 26, a roofer, is saving his arm. He's waiting for the end of the tournament, when opposing teams get tougher. Then he'll pitch.

In one tournament this summer, Tariela threw 30 innings, struck out 85 batters and gave up one run.

"My stuff is so sick," Tariela says. "It's unhitatable."

It has to do with the holes in the ball. They catch the wind, which curves the pitch.

"Everyone who pitches thinks they're Pedro Martinez," says Eric Newmark, co-director of NEWA.

Birth of the ball

There's a reason Wiffle Ball's big in New England. This is where it was born. In 1953, the father and grandfather of a young boy who wanted to pitch like a pro produced a plastic perforated ball to help him do so.

The ball begat a business. Wiffle Ball Inc., based in Shelton, Conn., gives people a baseball-like experience without the need for a big field or a team and without the risk of broken windows.

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For decades people have played Wiffle Ball, although not seriously. How serious can you be in a backyard?

"If you hit any leaf in the outfield, it was a home run," Tariela says. "We had a really big tree in the middle of the yard. It made it so everything was a home run. We had really high-scoring games."



Journal photo / [Bob Breidenbach](#)

**Jay Tariela of the R.I. Kings eyes a pitch in a game with the Young Guns.**

From boyhood to adulthood, Tariela and his brother Jay, now 27, a house painter, played Wiffle Ball with their Burrillville friends, who would later become their Rhode Island Kings teammates: Gaudini, Dennis Browning, 29, an ironworker, and Tom Giglio, 26, a manager of a health food store.

One day in 1999, shortly after the formation of NEWA, the Burrillville bunch heard about it. Naturally, they got excited.

"I thought, 'let's go kick some butt,' " Nick Tariela says.

The Burrillville guys formed a team, entered a tournament and witnessed some serious butt kicking: their own.

"We got there and saw pitches we had never seen before," Nick Tariela says. "We thought, 'oh my God, what is that?' "

It was the difference between amateur and semi-professional Wiffle Ball.

Wiffle, by the way, gets its name for a synonym for a strikeout, a whiff.

In the Wiffle Ball world, there are two speeds: fast and slow. NEWA is slow.

While other Wiffle Ball tournament organizations allow pitchers to throw as fast as they want, NEWA sets a 38

mph, radar-gun-enforced limit

"When you throw fast, it becomes impossible to hit," Newmark says. "The game loses its fun."

A maximum of three players take the field, which is shaped like a pie wedge. There are two outfielders, one pitcher and no umpires. A pitch that hits a rectangular target is a strike.

"You either hit it or you don't," Newmark says. "It's pretty clear cut."

Unfielded grounders past the pitcher are singles. Grounders to the fence are doubles. Liners to the fence are triples. Anything over the fence is a home run.

There's no running of bases, and no wearing of gloves.

"Put it this way," Nick Tariela says. "We don't count errors."

Even a pop-up can pose a problem. A severely spinning Wiffle Ball can easily squirm out of someone's hands.

Making the rounds

This summer, roughly 250 teams have competed in NEWA tournaments, up from 44 five years ago.

"It's a big underground movement," Newmark says. "It's got a huge following."

This tournament in Sharon draws 60 teams and 200 players. Most are men, generally in their late teens or early 20s.

But then there's Meredith Davis, 19, of Worcester, one of two women in the tournament, whose presence and play surprises the men.

"You can tell," Davis says. "They're shocked when I get a hit."

Paul Rosen of Worcester is also an atypical player, a 53-year-old grandfather.

"There really should be more guys my age," Rosen says. "You don't have to run and it's a light bat."

Rosen and Davis were introduced to the sport by the same person, Seth Rosen, 18. He's the son of Paul Rosen, the boyfriend of Davis and the founder of the two-year-old Mass Wiff League.

Last year, after years of learning how to throw and hit tricky Wiffle Ball pitches, the Rhode Island Kings won the

NEWA Championship, but not the complete respect of their vanquished opponents: Doom, Doom Gone Wild and J.J. Wild.

"We felt we should be the champions," says Adam Trotta, 31, of Milford, a Doom team member. "We won three tournaments; they won one."

But the tournament the Rhode Island Kings won was the last one of the season, the championship. Still, there were those who questioned who was the region's true champion on NEWA's online message board during the off-season.

Trotta, however, says it was just some "friendly razzing."

Nick Tariela razzed back. During the off season, he changed his team's name from the Rhode Island Kings to the 2003 Season Champs.

"I couldn't help myself," Tariela says. "They were so mad and were talking trash about us, and saying wait till next year, la, la, la."

In Saturday's tournament, the two teams may meet in the final, something that didn't happen in Sharon. The Rhode Island Kings were eliminated just before the quarter finals. The tournament winner was Doom.

"They've beaten us plenty, but not when it mattered" Nick Tariela says. "When it's me pitching against Doom, they will not beat me."

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