

Ken Schaake remains steady as manager through all the changes of Legion ball

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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In nearly 40 years of involvement with American Legion baseball, it's safe to say Edwardsville's Ken Schaake has pretty much seen everything.

He's seen Legion ball go from a summertime staple in the Metro East area to several top programs either merging to survive or outright folding. He's seen had teams come together to win state, regional and even national championships. He's worked with players of all abilities improve their skills and learn how to play baseball the right way.

And through it all, his approach to the game has pretty much remained steady.

“I started out as a coach (for Edwardsville Post 199) in 1978, and then became the team manager in 1981,” Schaake said in an interview. “I've been the manager ever since, and yes, I've seen a lot of things happen over the years.”

Schaake doesn't believe the Legion's approach to baseball has changed much over the years; what's affected Legion baseball is the growth of summer select teams, which compete with traditional Legion teams for players. “There has been more developmental and select teams that have drawn players away from Legion teams,” Schaake said. “There's more competition for players; I coached teams for 17 years before other teams began to attract players.

“There really wasn't much competition for players until the late 1990s, when select teams really began to make inroads. High school summer teams also really got started about that time too. It gave players a chance to play for the coaches they have during the high school season.”

As a result, Legion teams that thrived during the summer months got to the point where they couldn't find enough players to field a team. It affected several programs in the area and forced the creation last year of the Metro East Bears, co-sponsored by the Alton and Edwardsville American Legion posts. The nickname Bears is an amalgamation of the cities represented on the team, Bethalto, Edwardsville, Alton and Roxana.

“It's forced us to make adjustments,” Schaake said. “We've lost programs like Tri-City (Granite City, Madison and Venice), Smithton (near Belleville), Troy and Collinsville. We used to have 17 teams (in Illinois District 22) and now we're down to five senior teams.”

Schaake can understand why some players decide to play on select or traveling teams during the summer. “Some kids want to play on traveling teams, and they play all the time,” Schaake said. “But some clubs charge players to play on their teams, and we don't. It's hard to get enough players to play these days, and we have to get our schedules ready in January.

“It's hard to get commitments from players, but the players we do have are committed to playing and we have some good players on our team. We'll keep going because Legion baseball is important.”