

Double play: Have fun and avoid injuries

Englewood Senior League softballers get ready for their 2019 season

By ED SCOTT
SPECIAL SECTIONS EDITOR

When these seniors take the field, many are as concerned about returning home safely as they are about being safe at home plate.

After a lifetime of keeping fit while working at various jobs and careers, retiring and moving to Southwest Florida gave these men — about 220, in their 60s, 70s and 80s — opportunities to practice and play softball year round. But first they must learn how to avoid injury and embrace challenges found only on the chalk lines and clay surface of a softball diamond.

Playing sports in their twilight years creates physical obstacles few faced as younger athletes. Experienced players are quick to offer advice to the approximately 50 rookies who come out each year, to help them stay healthy and coming back.

"We find that we have got to warm up before a game," said Rich Entlich, 78, a player and the league commissioner. "You've got to stretch all your muscles. You've got to warm up your arm."

Before you warm up, you must sign up. Englewood Senior Softball

MORE INFORMATION

Visit EnglewoodSeniorSoftball.Weebly.com or call 941-460-9645 for more information.

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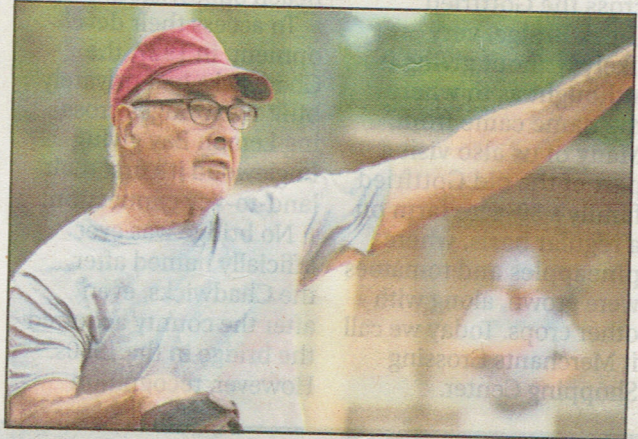


On the mound, Walter Voll wears a mask. He doesn't take any chances against some big swingers.

is registering players now. The league runs January through mid-March. Open practice sessions are underway, 8:30 a.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at Englewood Sports Complex, 1300 River Road.

The league's mission is to provide recreational softball for men over 60. The Gold Division is for players over 60, Silver Division is over 67, and the new Bronze Division is for players over 67 with declining skills. Players can come out to practice, meet other players, sharpen their softball skills and have some fun, league officials say. Registration forms for the 2019 season are available at the ESC office building.

About 30 determined men gathered for practice



Burt Rood loosens up before a scrimmage.



Claude Sniezek summons his inner Babe Ruth as he sends one deep to right.

Oct. 10 as an outer band of Hurricane Michael sprinkled a mist on the field and threatened much more.

A hockey player in his youth, Rudy Davis had not played softball for more than 30 years

before he moved to Englewood. Davis, now 66, is beginning his sixth season in the league. He's a league coordinator in the Gold Division and sits on the board of directors.

PLAY

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Davis says if you want to be a good player in this league, you have to master fielding, hitting and throwing.

"I tend to work mostly on throwing," the infielder said, "and try to get my arm strength better by the time the season starts. Running is important, obviously, but a lot of guys have limitations. We're older. You've got bad hips, bad knees. Back backs. Everything."

October in this league is like Major League Baseball spring training in Port Charlotte, Sarasota or — soon — the West Villages. Players split up and work on their



SUN PHOTO BY STEPHEN MCKAY

First baseman Rick Gilbert fields a throw.

hitting and fielding skills. Players give each other advice, but no one is a designated "coach."

Being an athlete at any age means balancing the reward of getting exercise with the risk of injury. Jake Marzucco,

65, of Englewood, is about to begin his fourth year in the league. Smiling, he said the biggest challenge is "not pulling a muscle or hurting your knee." He mentions his interior cruciate ligament and

says his knees are "bone to bone." But there's no time to discuss past injuries.

"Hey, I'm the last one," Marzucco yells to a practice organizer, not wanting the interview to reduce his time on the field.

To complete a season successfully — i.e. to avoid injury — participants must rethink how they played sports in earlier years. In senior softball, it's not enough to hit the ball and run to first base. You have to worry about *how* you run to first base, Entlich said.

"Your first step out of home plate you are going to pull a muscle because you are going to want to get to first base right away," he said. "Take it easy. It's a *recreational*

league."

But it's a league run well enough to be around for more than two decades. The league was founded around 1994 (Entlich was a "young 54", playing soccer in Virginia).

In life, timing is everything, most especially when you are 78 and trying to hit a softball wafted at you from about 50 feet away. Entlich's counsel to rookies would be sound advice for softball players of all ages.

"The first thing is the timing of a pitch," he said. "You need to be patient at the plate. The other thing is ... the infields are a little bit bumpy. You need to be careful when you get in front of the ball."

Some infielders wear masks because batted balls occasionally carom into their chests or faces, like a billiard ball that leaves a pool table.

"When it hits you in the face, that's an issue," Entlich said.

Batters who try to stretch a single into a double can create another issue. Some pull their hamstrings.

"I've seen it happen a hundred times," Entlich said.

One thing players never encounter is home plate collisions. The field they were practicing on at ESC has two home plates, one for the catcher to guard, awaiting throws from the outfield, and another for runners to step on.

Because it's important to get home safe.

OD: OUR TOWN

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Jake Marzucco reaches for an outside pitch.



An unidentified man leans up against the fencing. At right is Mike Geddes. Walt Lawrence is the man in the middle