

PLAYING THE OLD BALLGAME

It's What Keeps Them Young.

The old guys spray old-guy jokes at each other, dropping them like dink hits all around the softball field. This guy can't run. That guy can't remember. Another guy can hardly breathe. "Watch it, don't give yourself a heart attack," a guy who just hit a double is told as he puffs into second base. Busting chops, like guys do. The guys in the Middlesex County over-70 softball league have had at least six decades of practice; they're incessant. The best. That is, when they're not arguing calls. Boys will be boys. And some boys these days don't age out of softball until over 80. There is a proliferation of 70-and-over leagues all over New Jersey and nationally.

Life's too short. Each day, more than ever. So just play. The guys play doubleheaders every Wednesday morning at Veteran's Park in Old Bridge. Appropriate names, all around. The guys are veterans of life, who have found the bridge between their youth and what lies ahead. Softball. "The skill level is still there", said Dick Raymond, who started the over-70 league two years ago. "The problem is running. The legs aren't there like they used to be." Tom Jackson is 78 and plays with a heavy knee brace and two shin pads. He has his own version of Satchel Paige's "Don't look back, something might be gaining on you." "It's hard to hit a moving target, so I keep moving," he said. He didn't know what the "it" was. We all know. "I had a knee replacement, but I keep going," he said, moments before lacing a line-drive double down the left-field line. "As long as the desire supersedes the pain, you keep going."

But a few weeks ago his desire superseded his entire body. He played two seven-inning games in 98-degree heat. "I was drinking plenty of water, but I became disoriented," he said. Three days in the hospital followed, but he checked out fine. The next week, he was back out there. And then he said something heard often around the diamonds at Veteran's Park. "Softball is my life, much to my wife's chagrin". And this is the bottom line on the over-70 league. These guys, with their bowed legs and varicose veins, with their sun-wrinkled skin and liver spots, with their thinning hair and gray all over, they're

still ballplayers. Some come from two counties away. Some play in multiple leagues. Over-60, over-65. In the over-70, they're the young, fast guys again.

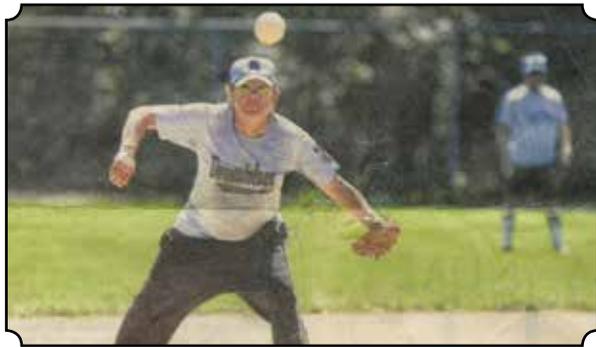
Ron Chiorello, 72, plays in three leagues and plays in seven games most weeks. "I played eight games in four days. I thank God, I can run. I mean it, every day, I thank God I can still run."

Cliff Rockwell, 74, can still run, too, even with the light brace on one knee. And dive, too. On a line drive hit to center, he stretched out and dived for the ball, coming up just short, but more importantly, coming up fine. "I play hard. It makes up for my inadequacies", he said. "Some of these guys are really good ballplayers."

A few, like Michael Devane, Freddy DiMartino and Norm Stumpf have played on three national championship senior teams and one world championship team. DiMartino, a retired Newark mounted cop, has played for seven state champs. "We've been playing with the same guys for 20 years," said Stumpf, who was in the New York Giants' farm system after graduating from West Side High but ripped up his knee. That knee is still braced – "it's been my curse" – and Stumpf is on crutches now, out with a broken foot, but "I'll be back". Stumpf broke a foot playing; took a line drive off it. "We play for fun, but it's competitive," Raymond said. "We have guys who still hit hard' we have guys who will still slide. Not many, but a few."

This is good and bad. Good, because it shows their hearts are still in it. Bad, because the body may not follow. "When you're playing, you're thinking back 30 years. Your mind says you can, but your body says you can't," said Joel Greenberg, 72, as he got ready to hit in the seventh inning. "To me, a good game is where nobody gets hurt. But the bottom line is, we're all damn lucky. We're over 70 and out there playing ball." Left unsaid was "considering the alternative". And then Greenberg got up with the bases loaded, and cleared them with a double to right-center to give his team a 9-8 win. Lucky? Maybe. Just don't call him old.

Mark Dilonno – Newark Star Ledger



Joe Fiore, 73, of Leonard waits for the ball at second base during a game in the Middlesex County Over-70 Softball League.



Bobby Hospidor, 77, of Sayreville takes a cut in Veteran's Park in Old Bridge.

Notable Quotables

"When they operated, I told them to add in a Koufax fastball. They did, but unfortunately it was Mrs. Koufax's."

—Tommy John, N.Y. Yankees, recalling his 1974 arm surgery.

Did You Know?

... there are six players from New Jersey Senior Softball have been inducted into the National Senior Softball Hall of Fame. They include Mike Christy, a co-founder of NJSSA, and Pioneer Players, Ed Basile from Toms River, Paul Oliver, West Orange, and Joe Tilelli, Sayreville. "Pete" Smith from Brielle, and Bob Richards, Toms River, round out this elite group to have received this prestigious honor.

... The National Senior Softball Hall of Fame was founded in 1995 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and is now headquartered in Mustang, Oklahoma. Its' purpose is to recognize players, managers, umpires, directors, and sponsors, who have achieved the highest honors in Senior Softball.

