

Major's League

The Boys of Autumn

by Tom Major

The Ballpark, in Old Orchard Beach, is showing its age, with paint peeling from the skyboxes and duct tape covering cracks in many seats. Yet the field itself is in prime condition and is heavily used by many leagues. On sunny Sundays in October, players from the Maine Woods League gather for their annual best-of-five fall baseball series between the Coastals and the Mountaineers. Like the park, the players are some distance past their prime, but they enjoy America's pastime as much as they ever did – maybe even more so.

Maine Woods is a seniors baseball league based in Bath. Dick Hill founded it over two decades ago by calling people who'd dropped out of the league for players over 30, inviting them to form 45+ teams. Some were reluctant, having settled into softball leagues or their recliners, but enough men came back for four teams that first season. The following year it was six teams, and then it grew to six teams at 45+ and four teams for those 60 and older.

Phil Hunt, a former player and high school coach, has been calling balls and strikes for 60 years. "They're almost as much fun as thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds," he said of Maine Woods players. "They're just playing for fun. There's no

crowd, no parents, no pressure. Everybody likes each other. Everybody applauds when they make a good play."

No crowd is an understatement. I joined three others in the 6,000-seat stadium for the opening pitch. By the bottom of the ninth, our numbers had swollen to eight.

"Good thing for you that you got here early," quipped Larry Murphy, a 68-year-old pitcher and first baseman for the Coastals. "The place fills up."

As for *no pressure*? Sometimes the guys on the field were having so much fun that they lost track of the innings and the score. At one point, I apologized to league president Michael Doucette for breaking his concentration by asking him a question while he was on deck. "Concentration?" Doucette chuckled. "This is concentrating on the game: looking around, looking at the clouds, and at the grass. It's just fun to be out here."

Later in the game, Murphy, whom Hunt called the most clever and knowledgeable player on the field, turned to the dugout while chatting with me and demanded, "OK, who's on deck?"

"You, Murph," a voice called back. "You're on deck."

Murphy grabbed a bat, laughed

sheepishly, and said, "OK, well, that explains it." Then he gave me an update: "It's the bottom of the ninth and we're down by two."

"You sure?" I asked.

Murphy called over to the scorekeeper and got the correct tally. "Thirteen-eight?" he cried. "That sounds terrible!" Then he shrugged and added, "We just need a five-run homer."

Yet Hunt is not wrong about Murphy's baseball intelligence. He pitched three innings and knew each batter's strengths, weaknesses and habits. He knew precisely where he wanted each pitch, and if he couldn't deliver it there every time, he was ready to catch an infield pop-up for a third out.

Like the others, Murphy is competing with no one but himself, striving to play at his best level and encouraging everyone else to do the same. "We all forget we don't have it anymore," he commented as a runner tried to stretch a single into a double before retreating to first base. But he said that like it was a *good* thing.

Seventy-six-year-old Nava Spaulding clearly forgot he'd lost it when he squeezed a double out of a single on a fielder's error, stole third on the next pitch, and then came home on a double.

League founder Hill, now 81, pitched two innings in Game 3 before taking the bench with a little pain. He suffered a heart attack the following day, but Doucette told me, "the problem was solved with two stents and some medications. There is no reason to believe he won't be back on the field and mound next season."

True to Maine Woods' slogan: "Play baseball forever." II

Strong views and hot tips are welcome at leagueofbollards@gmail.com.



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