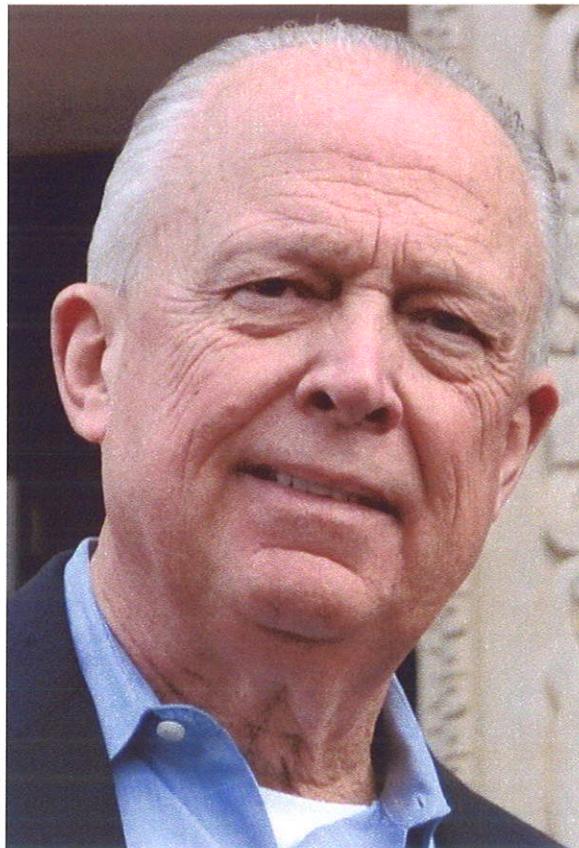


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Richard Eckstrom Guest Column: The societal value of American Legion Baseball

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Richard Eckstrom

The American Legion plays a special role in the lives of military veterans. It's a source of fellowship, advocacy, healing, and support, as well as a venue through which its members give back to their communities.

But its value extends far beyond its membership, with service projects designed to nurture the American ideals of patriotism, citizenship, public participation, and civility. One such initiative is its youth summer baseball program. (Another of its South Carolina youth leadership programs I admire is Palmetto Boys State/Girls State.)

Since 1926, the American Legion has sponsored a national baseball league as a "program of service to

the youth of America.” More than 90 years later, Legion ball offers considerable benefits for the young athletes, ages 13 to 19, on its team rosters. In keeping with the Legion’s mission, it promotes character, sportsmanship, and teamwork. It provides valuable offseason training and conditioning for high school and college players. And some local American Legion units – called “posts” – award scholarship money to deserving college-bound players.

Through fundraisers and sponsorships, Legion posts are usually able to defray operational costs and keep player fees minimal. And Legion members themselves are sometimes active as volunteers, coaches, and league sponsors.

For decades Legion ball reigned supreme among summer youth sports. But the 2000s saw dwindling participation across the nation. Officials with the S.C. chapter of the American Legion tell me that’s largely the result of players having more options, including so-called “travel ball” – which usually features a more rigorous game schedule and nearly year-round play, and which has been growing rapidly in popularity.

In South Carolina, the declining number of young people playing American Legion baseball had mirrored the national downturn. But more recently, the program is experiencing a resurgence, with the number of participating teams climbing from a low of 50 teams eight years ago to more than 70 this year.

Still, folks involved with the S.C. American Legion Baseball program tell me they’re working to bring greater attention to Legion ball and all it has to offer. A handful of changes this year – including moving the state championship tournament to Columbia’s Spirit Communications Park, the home of the New York Mets minor league affiliate Columbia Fireflies – were implemented with that goal in mind.

Last month I was able to catch some of the state tournament, which culminated with a four-team contest among Gaffney Post 109, Florence Post 1, Sumter Post 15, and the eventual winner, Chapin/Newberry Post 193/24. It was exciting baseball. There are few things more pure than America’s pastime in South Carolina in the summer – made possible by those who already have given so much of themselves.

It’s reassuring to see a rebounding interest in Legion ball, not just because of the Legion’s tangible investment in its players but also because of the values it espouses – values that today seem in short supply.

American Legion Baseball’s emphasis on sportsmanship, goodwill, and yes, even grace in defeat are sorely needed today. Let’s hope this program remains strong for many generations to come.

Richard Eckstrom is a CPA and the state Comptroller.