

Jim Peck is honored for 60 years of service to state youth baseball

By **JOHN SHERMAN**

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Imagine this scene, if you will. There are 7,600 baseball coaches in a huge banquet hall at a hotel in Nashville, Tenn., and they're all quiet.

You might guess that they're quiet and reserved because there are no umpires in the hall. Good guess, but that isn't it. They are quiet - and attentive - as the speaker chronicles Jim Peck's 60 years of service to Minnesota youth baseball.

At the American Baseball Coaches' Association convention in Nashville, Peck was given a national award for "Service to Youth Baseball."

His coaching career began 60 years ago when he signed on as a coach in the East Tonka Babe Ruth League. Then, in 1974, he stepped up to the highest level of youth baseball in Minnesota as head coach and manager of the Excelsior American Legion Baseball team.

Peck hung up his uniform for the last time in 2019, but remains as general manager of the



(SUN PHOTO BY JOHN SHERMAN)

Excelsior Legion baseball general manager Jim Peck is one of the directors managing the State Division I Legion Baseball Tournament each summer. Here, he talks with former State Legion Baseball Director Mike Perry about how to handle a rain delay.

Excelsior Legion team, which is now coached by Rob Hager. In addition to his service in the local Legion baseball program, Peck is a member of the State American Legion Baseball committee and served for years as the state 16-year-old director.

"Jim has put 60 years into youth baseball at the community and state levels," former Minnesota American Legion Baseball state director Mike Perry said. "I'm not sure if that kind of service will ever be duplicated."

Going back to the beginning in 1963, how did Peck become involved in youth baseball?

"My dad believed in volunteerism, and I guess I followed his example," Peck said recently. "I wanted to do something in the community, and baseball seemed like a place that I could have an impact on the lives of young people."

Peck grew up playing sports in the small community of Deer River, Minnesota. He didn't just play, he excelled, winning 15 varsity letters in high school.

Peck not only had an impact on the young people he coached, he taught them how to be winners in life. Along with other volunteers in East Tonka, he built the local Babe Ruth program into a state powerhouse. Fredrick Herfurth, the team that Peck co-managed with Guy Blessing, won two Minnesota state championships in the 1970s.

Some of the players on that Babe Ruth team joined Peck to help revitalize the Excelsior Legion program in 1974. Fredrick Herfurth standouts Mitchell Benson, Chris Buck, Lane Brettingen and Jim Stubbs made a transition in leading Peck's first American Legion team.

"The first year with the Legion team was our only losing season," Peck said. "We inherited absolutely nothing ... some of the equipment left over from the previous Legion team was 12 years old."

Peck reached into his own pocket and received financial help from the Excelsior Legion Post. Soon the team had new uniforms, red batting helmets and proper equipment. The support from the Excelsior Post continues to this day, and Peck is grateful that the Chanhasen Legion Post, which is one of the state's largest, has provided ongoing financial backing. Peck also believes players in the program should help raise money - whether it's by bagging groceries at one of the local stores or delivering phone directories in the Minnetonka area.

Excelsior became a power in the South Hennepin League and qualified for the State Tournament for the first time in 1975. In 1991, Peck's club became the state Legion champion for the first time. Excelsior has had two other state championship teams since then along with numerous trips to regional tournaments.

"I was fortunate to coach three players who played in the Major Leagues for more than 10

years," Peck said, referring to Jim Brower, Steve Comer and Mike Mason. "You get that when you coach as long as I have. I am proud that we've had 33 of our players sign professional baseball contracts."

Among national Legion coaches, Peck ranks fifth in wins all-time with his 1,940 total.

In addition to the recent award from the American Baseball Coaches' Association, Peck has been honored with other state and national awards. He is a member of the American Amateur Baseball Congress Hall of Fame, the Minnesota Amateur Baseball Hall of Fame and the Minnesota American Legion Baseball Hall of Fame. Peck won the "11 Who Care Award" from KARE-11.

"The Award from the American Baseball Coaches' Association is very, very humbling," Peck said. "My calling in life has been to make things better for kids. Many of us have put in a lot of work to make the Minnesota American Legion Baseball program No. 1 in the country."