

Kevin McKeever: Sharing dugout with local legends

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John "Sharkey" Laureno.

Stamford has long been a baseball town – a main reason being the strength of its youth programs. Two native sons who helped build a love of America's pastime in local children are to be honored starting July 29 at, what else, a youth baseball competition.

And little did I know that for the past four years I had been sharing a dugout with both honorees. Sort of.

Scalzi Park's Cubeta Stadium is kicking off the 30th annual John "Sharkey" Laureno Memorial Tournament, a week-long event for 13- to 15-year-olds named after a local coaching and officiating legend. Laureno helped pioneer organized baseball for that age group in Stamford, even managing the city's first-ever Babe Ruth All-Star team to that

national league's inaugural World Series title in 1953. By his death in January 1987, Lauro had led numerous other Stamford baseball teams to titles, local and national.

As testament to Lauro's impact on young ballplayers, a group of his friends started the tournament for players as a way to raise college scholarship money for alumni of Stamford's Babe Ruth Baseball program. According to tournament organizers, the event has awarded more than \$334,000 to 148 league graduates.

One of those alumni is **Joe "Junie" DeLeo**, who served as an ace left-handed pitcher on several of Lauro's championship teams in the 1950s. DeLeo pitched well enough to spend a year in the minors with the expansion **New York Mets** before coming back to Stamford for his second baseball career: coaching Little League for 49 years.

The Lauro Tournament directors will recognize DeLeo with an award for being a person who "best exemplifies the dedication and selflessness to better the youth of the Stamford community."

Having been one of his assistant coaches since 2013, I have to say a better choice could not have been made.

Junie (only his wife of 50 years, Sandra, calls him "DeLeo") started as an assistant coach in **Springdale Little League** in 1967 for the team sponsored by his then-employer, Clairol hair and beauty products. He took over the team in 2001. Though Clairol moved its operations out of Stamford in 2010, Junie still sponsors a Clairol team every spring out of his own pocket to keep the tradition alive.

Win or lose — and it's mostly win, Junie leaves a lasting mark on his players, some of whom now have their own kids playing in the league. Whenever I'm around town wearing my Clairol championship jacket or the team's trademark red cap, it's rare that someone doesn't say to me, "Is Coach DeLeo still there? I played for him in yadda-yadda-yadda. Tell him I said hi." I do, and sure enough, Junie will remember the boy, his position, sometimes even his batting average. That's in part because each season Junie compiles a book filled with photos, stats and write-ups on every game and gives a copy to each player so his kids have a keepsake of their experience.

Parents from other teams seek him to help their children with their pitching, and I've never heard of Junie refusing even if the boy is slated to pitch against Clairol next game. He emphasizes getting a sure out in the field even if it means giving up a run, and never

showing up another player, coach or umpire. Those are lessons all our political leaders should follow.

Though Junie told me this week that **Sharkey Lauren** had his teams play a far more aggressive style of baseball than he now practices, a bit of his former mentor is always with him. It's in the form of a tarnished metal MacGregor ball/strike/out indicator Junie uses to track pitch counts during games. You can often hearing him tapping it during down times during games.

"I was 14 or 15, down on Shippan Avenue umpiring a Little League game back behind the plate for the old **Federal League**," he said. "I would move around these rocks there to keep track of the ball and strike count."

Lauren happened by and asked what his player was doing messing around in the dirt when the game was going on. Lauren, who often spent entire weekends umpiring area softball games when he wasn't coaching, handed Junie the counter he carries with him to this day.

For information on and game times of the Sharkey Lauren Tournament, visit sharkeytournament.org.

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