

Coleman Memorial Park's hitting contest in the cards

The 28th annual Coleman Memorial Park Baseball Hitting Contest is open to all ages Sat., Aug. 23

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The 28th annual Coleman Memorial Park Baseball Hitting Contest is scheduled for Saturday, Aug. 23 from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. on the lower-level Twilight Field. (Jeremy Long — Lebanon Daily News)

LEBANON >> City native Karl 'Skip' Wolf sends out hundreds and hundreds of handwritten invitations every summer. His goal for nearly three decades has been simple — draw people to Coleman Memorial Park for its annual fireworks display. Not the pyrotechnic version on Independence Day, either.

Wolfe, a 32 year member of the park's Board of Trustees, has organized Lebanon County's premiere Baseball Hitting Contest since its inception in 1987.

The 28th rendition of Coleman Park's Hitting Contest swings for the fences Saturday Aug. 23 on the lower-level Twilight Field. The all-day event runs from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and includes divisions for all ages, genders and skill levels. The slugfest serves as a fundraiser to maintain and improve the park's three baseball diamonds.

"I'm just trying to keep the tradition alive," said Wolf, 62. "Twenty-eight years is a long time to keep anything going."

Participants can bring their own pitchers and are scored on a 25-pitch point system. Cost to enter is \$7.

"Any age is invited — we've had 3 year olds stand at home plate. If they get the ball fair — they get a point," said Wolf. "We've also had people in their late 70's and early 80's."

In 27 years, the contest has attracted 568 unique males and 58 females. The 2001 field included an all-time high of 123 entries.

Once labeled a home run derby, Wolf eventually rebranded it as hitting contest to draw more interest.

"We had an opportunity to put a perimeter fence around the Twilight field (in 1987)," he explained. "Up until that time, you had to run everything out. We had called it a 'Home Run Derby' in those days, but that excluded people who couldn't hit home runs like 8 year olds."

He also reminds past contestants by mailing personalized postcards every year — complete with career ranking and most recent appearance. He stamped out roughly 400 handwritten invitations for 2014.



Karl 'Skip' Wolf keeps tracks of hitters scores during the 2012 Coleman Memorial Park Baseball Hitting Contest. Wolf, a 1969 Lebanon High graduate, has organized the event since its inception in 1987. (Jeremy Long — Lebanon Daily News)

"I put way too much time into it," Wolf laughed. "I send them to people that haven't been here since 1990 in hopes they can come. I want to entice someone to come back and try again. Everything is the same. All the rules, the point system ——you can test your ability and see how much you regressed over the years. You can relive your youth."

Wolf and longtime friend Jay Putt laid the blueprint for the local contest in the early 80's after watching a home run derby in Harrisburg. They added a few twists of their own to promote safety and success.

"No pitching machines — the balls would be sailing over the batter's head or into the ground," explained Wolf. "We decided then and there that it would be live pitching. Get your father, uncle or friends, or just come out and ask someone if they'll pitch. We added that human element."



Hummelstown's Jamye (Mease) Bonnano, formerly of Elizabethtown, is the women's career leader at the Coleman Memorial Park Baseball Hitting Contest with 537 points. (Jeremy Long — Lebanon Daily News)

They also made the contest and all-day gathering at the park. "(In Harrisburg,) they had certain age groups that had to show up at certain hours. It restricted the drawing power," he said. "We made it a drop-in affair where you can show up anytime in the 10 hours. It made it more flexible."

NOTES >> Elizabethtown's Justin Mease ranks as the county's all-time leading smasher with 135 home runs. Lebanon's Jesse Brown checks in second on the career board with 122. Harrisburg's Will Lane, a 1997 Cedar grad, rakes in third at 58. Up-and-comer Travis Hoffman from Lebanon is fourth with 49 dingers in eight appearances.



Elizabethtown's Justin Mease holds the record for home runs in the Coleman Memorial Park Baseball Hitting Contest. Mease has connected for a career-best 135 dingers. (Jeremy Long — Lebanon Daily News)

In the women's division, Hummelstown's Jamye (Mease) Bonnano leads the way with 537 career points. Beth (Werner) Auman holds the second spot at 193. Christine Kirsch ranks third at 170 despite not hitting since 1999.