

Guest Column: California District 15 Little Leagues Keep Growing

By Ryan Wallace
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With the Major League Baseball season underway, it's only fitting that the youth of the country are also getting in on the act.

With opening day ceremonies swirling and kids kicking dirt in the batter's box in anticipation, Calaveras County (Calif.) Little Leagues are seeing a nice increase in participation. There are four leagues – Calaveras American, Calaveras National, Ebbetts Pass and Foothills – in Calaveras County that operate in District 15, along with teams from Amador and Tuolumne Counties.

Rob Hecoeks, who is the safety officer and coaches a team in the Ebbetts Pass league, said this year he's seen a nice spike in the number of kids getting involved with America's pastime.

"We have about 230 girls and boys, which is pretty close to a record season," Hecoeks said. "We're pretty excited about that."

There are 17 teams in the Ebbetts Pass Little League, which consists of Tee Ball teams up to the Triple-A teams from the Arnold, Avery and Murphy's areas. The league celebrated its Opening Day on Saturday.

Hecoeks said the increase in participation might be associated with a different approach the board took to attract more kids.

"One thing we did this year was really pushed the Web site," Hecoeks said. "In the past we advertised the league through the schools and we got the same people each year. We opened up the Web site and advertised a little more to the community and we saw more people."

Hecoeks said one thing that might have been a hindrance on numbers for the Ebbetts Pass league, may have been the weather being unpredictable up Highway 4.

"Up here in the Sierra Foothills with the snowfall, people aren't thinking about baseball," he said. "But as soon as the sun starts shining and the flowers come out, then they start thinking about baseball. But it seems these areas are growing and we're seeing more families and that means soccer and baseball have increased in numbers."

Cynthia Marshall, who is the player agent for the Foothills Little League, which encompasses the Valley Springs and Jenny Lind areas, said she too has noticed a lot of people coming into Calaveras County.

"Valley Springs has so much to offer... and a lot of people are moving into the area," she said.

Marshall's husband Charles is the president of Foothills Little League. Cynthia Marshall said there are 240 kids participating – up 20 from last year – on 20 teams.

Marshall said that not only are people moving into the area, they're also willing to help, which is extremely important.

"People don't talk about how much it truly takes to run a league," she said. "We have 11 dedicated people on the board, but we also have parents that are there to help and they're quick to do it."

Marshall said having Little Leagues and other sports that thrive would only help the young kids develop both on and off the playing field.

"We firmly believe that sports teaches people the direction to go in when they're older," she said. "Learning and the personal accomplishments are all beneficial."

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