

Inside The Nation

Baseball/Softball News at Diamond Nation

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SPRING FLING BLOOMS WITH OPENING OF DIAMOND NATION'S TOURNAMENT SEASON

A taste of spring weather has blessed Central New Jersey this week and has Diamond Nation's spacious baseball and softball facility in Flemington primed and ready to open its 2019 tournament season with the Spring Fling Tournament on Saturday and Sunday.

As high schools in New Jersey work toward the start of the 2019 season with practices and scrimmages going full bore, the spring tournament season at Diamond Nation focuses on the pre-high school age groups. This weekend's action at 'The Nation' will feature tournaments at the 10U, 11U and 12U age levels.

Diamond Nation's 2019 tournament season officially gets underway when the eight-team 12U Spring Fling tournament opens with a doubleheader at 9 a.m. on Saturday. The Jersey Shore Wave takes the field against the Diamond Jacks Super 12U in that opener on Field 2 while the Diamond Jacks 12U Gold encounters ASBA Downingtown on Field 6.



The competitive 12U Spring Fling field also includes the Keystone State Bombers, Monmouth Liberty Baseball Club, RE Knights and the SI Vikings.

The 12U Spring Fling tournament playoffs will be played Sunday afternoon. The semifinals will be contested at 1:15 p.m. on Fields 2 and 6. The championship game will follow at 5:30 p.m. on Field 2.

The 11U Spring Fling tournament opens with a doubleheader at 11 a.m. on Saturday. The NJ Renegades face ASBA Warminster on Field 3A and the Diamond Jacks Super 11U opposes ASBA Downingtown on Field 3B.

The 11U Spring Fling playoffs is a five-team affair. The Nos. 4 and 5 seeds square off on Field 3A at 12 p.m., the Nos. 2 and 3 seeds battle on Field 2 at 3:15 p.m. and the No. 1 seed plays the winner of the Nos. 4 and 5 seed game at 3:15 p.m. The 11U Spring Fling championship game will be contested at 5:30 p.m. on Sunday on Field 6.

ASBA Warminster collides with the Diamond Jacks 10U squad in the 10U Spring Fling opener at 11 a.m. on Saturday on Field 4A. The entire 10U tournament, in fact, will be conducted on Field 4A.

The 10U Spring Fling playoffs are set for Sunday when the Nos. 2 vs. 3 seeds meet at 11 a.m. The winner of that first round contest advances to the 10U Spring Fling championship game opposite the No. 1 seed at 1 p.m.



FRED "MOOSE" HILL, A BASEBALL LIFER BELOVED BY HIS PLAYERS AND COACHES

By Bob Behre

We all like to believe we are put here on earth for a purpose. No better proof of such can be seen in the life of Fred Hill, Sr., "Moose" to his friends, coaches, players and even some acquaintances.

Coach Hill, 84, won 941 college baseball games during 30 years as Rutgers head coach and another 148 games at Montclair State. Those 1,089 career wins tell a story of success but do little to reveal the man who was admired, respected and relied upon by so many in the New Jersey baseball community.

Coach Hill died on March 2 after suffering a series of health setbacks.

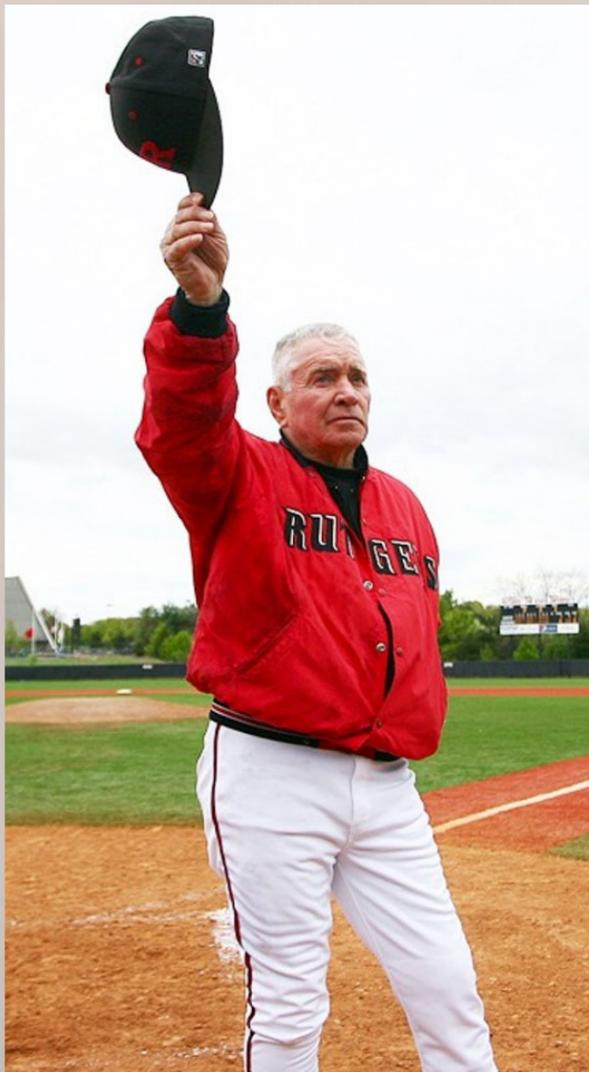
Perhaps Hill's longest and closest friend in baseball, former longtime Montclair State University coach Norm Schoenig, can provide that valuable insight. Schoenig was Hill's assistant with the Verona American Legion team in the summer of 1975.

"Coach Hill is the finest individual I've had the opportunity to meet," said Schoenig. "He is the epitome of the true person, therefore becoming a true coach. He was sincere, hard-working, selfless and loving. Those were the qualities he brought to the diamond as well as his daily life."

Hill and Schoenig coached together at the start and at the very end of Hill's coaching career. "I've been friends with coach Hill for 45 years," said Schoenig. The two paired up again at Montclair State in 1977-'83. Schoenig followed Hill to Rutgers, where he was his assistant for four years before Schoenig returned to MSU to take the head coaching position.

After each retired from their longtime college posts, they never strayed from the game. Or simply refused to. Hill helped out as an assistant at Caldwell University in 2015-'16 and both landed at Kean University the past two seasons as assistants under Neil Ioviero, one of Hill's former players.

"I will be forever grateful to coach Ioviero for providing me with the opportunity to work with not only he and his fine staff but with coach Hill again," said Schoenig.



Having coach Hill providing advice for one more season certainly is something Ioviero will carry with him forever.

"When you are on this earth, you want to know that you are doing something noble and you are making a difference in people's daily lives," said Ioviero. Coach Hill made a difference in thousands of lives. He is the epitome of a man. Two words that sum him up are, 'The Best.'"

Current Rutgers coach Joe Litterio coached under Hill before ascending to the head coaching job after Hill's retirement.

"Where do I start?" asks Litterio. "How do you say goodbye to a man who has meant so much to so many different people? He was a leader by example. He taught us to do things the right way, to win with class. Nothing fancy, just old-fashioned hard work. And that was just the baseball side of him. He taught us much more than the fundamentals of baseball. He taught us the fundamentals of life."

Seton Hall University coach Rob Sheppard went toe-to-toe with coach Hill on the baseball diamond for New Jersey bragging rights, as did his own legendary father, Mike Sheppard, Sr., before him. Hill and Sheppard, Sr., the longtime Pirates coach, combined for more than 2,000 college victories.

"Coach Hill was called old school," said Rob Sheppard. "Men from that era are genuine, good family men. They tell you how they feel about something."

Hill and Sheppard, Sr., though fierce competitors, were cut from the same cloth and certainly regarded each other with a high level of respect.

"Freddy was a tough competitor," said the younger Sheppard. "His relationship with my dad and mom grew the last several years. He was a good man, an elder statesman, and a very knowledgeable coach with a lot of success. There haven't been many people like Freddy Hill around."

As Diamond Nation begins the celebration of its 10th Anniversary, it does so with
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FRED HILL (continued from front page)



thoughts of coach Hill, front-and-center. "Moose" seemed to be omnipresent at the Flemington facility those 10 summers, scouting future Scarlet Knights and, clearly, enjoying watching the development of young players.

Fred Hill touched so many, often away from the spotlight and not exclusively those who would be part of his Rutgers program.

"When I was in high school," said Diamond Nation president Keith

Dilgard, who was graduated from Bridgewater-Raritan and would attend Mississippi State University, "I was pitching in an American Legion game and I let my emotions spill over at the home plate umpire. Needless to say, coach Hill was in the stands recruiting. He took it upon himself to pull me aside after the game. I can tell you first hand coach Hill wasn't all about teaching baseball. He was about teaching life lessons."

Hill still tugs at players hearts nearly 40 years later. Tony Sabato, an infielder who played for Hill at Montclair State in late 1970s and early 80s, simply posted on his Facebook page above a photo of Hill, "My coach, my mentor, my friend."

We can easily blow up the internet, as the saying goes, with similar Fred Hill stories and an unlimited amount of sentiments provided by the many he has positively affected. Rutgers' athletic staff, in fact, did an excellent job posting dozens of such comments from Hill's former players, assistant coaches and fellow coaches around the country.

"I could speak for hours on what coach Hill represented," said his former player and longtime Rutgers assistant Glen Gardner. "It was more than baseball. As far as I'm concerned, I would never have been a coach if it wasn't for Moose. If I helped anyone through my 29 years, it was an extension of Moose. He might not be with us on this planet anymore, but he's still teaching baseball to a lot of players." Gardner, an Immaculata High School grad, once held the all-time scholastic career hits record in New Jersey.

Coach Hill, inducted into the American Baseball Coaches Association Hall of Fame in 2015, was more than a living New Jersey legend. He was a highly respected coach nationally. His Rutgers teams reached the NCAA regional tournament 11 times, won 12 regular season conference championships and eight conference tournament titles. He coached 72 players who went on to play professionally.

"I've known Fred for a long, long time, competing against him as coach at Georgia Tech and at Miami," said recently retired Miami coach Jim Morris. "Fred was an outstanding competitor and an even better person. He carried his mentality as a football coach into baseball and was always a tough competitor. I always enjoyed playing against him, because I knew it was going to be a hard-fought game each and every time."

Former Rutgers player Tim Querns gave a little insight into the precision expected during a Fred Hill practice.

"When I first visited Rutgers' locker room, I noticed a sign that said 'perfect practice makes perfect,' said Querns. "I remember thinking, well, that's kind of obvious. But at the time, I did not know what a perfect practice looked like or that the way Moose ran his practices would put me into a family I didn't know existed. That was a family of players who endured a 'Moose' practice. It didn't matter if you were a projected first rounder or a walk-on trying out. Moose expect everyone to practice at the same level, perfect."

While hard work, dedication, loyalty and family were certainly synonymous with the way Fred Hill led his life, he was also, through-and-through, a New Jersey guy, raised in East Orange, an outstanding athlete in high school and college, at Upsala. He became an amazing coach and mentor of young men. And he certainly had a soft spot for the hard-nosed New Jersey player.

"He took pride in recruiting predominantly student-athletes from New Jersey and we always appreciated that," said Dilgard. "We lost one of New Jersey's great baseball men. He will be sorely missed."

For Schoenig, it runs even deeper.

"Our hearts are broken, eventually to become scarred, but never fully healed."

FORMER NJ SUPER 17ER GASPARRO BATTING .531 FOR UNC-ASHEVILLE



By Bob Behre

Greg Gasparro has always looked good no matter where he was placed on a baseball diamond while playing for the Diamond Jacks, NJ Super 17 and his high school team, Hopewell Valley. Now that well-rounded ability is shining on a bigger stage.

Gasparro has exploded out of the gate at the start of his junior season at UNC-Asheville (5-9), ripping it to the tune of a team-leading .531 batting average, including a 3-for-4 performance last Saturday as the Bulldogs defeated Georgia Southern, 14-9. Gasparro is batting leadoff of late in the UNC-Asheville lineup and playing center fielder.

The 6-0, 180-pound lefthander is 0-3 on the mound, thus far, including a loss last Sunday to Georgia Southern. Gasparro's value to the UNC-Asheville lineup is such that, despite getting the start on the mound on Sunday, he batted leadoff in the game. That was the first time this season Gasparro has batted during one of his starts.

"I think the biggest thing is just staying committed to what I'm doing during practice and before games," said Gasparro about his hot start at the plate, "and trusting what my coaches are telling me."

Gasparro is 17-for-36 in nine games with four doubles and three RBI. He boasts a gaudy .583 on-base percentage and is slugging at a robust .656. That translates into a hefty 1.239 OPS. The doubles, on-base percentage, slugging and OPS numbers all lead the Bulldogs. The Pennington, N.J. resident batted .286 in 26 games as a sophomore last season.

Gasparro has played all three outfield positions and has batted leadoff six times, all of which have come during his recent hot streak. He was slotted into the leadoff spot for the first time against UMBC on Feb. 23 and responded by going 4-for-6, scoring three runs and driving home three runs in a 17-14 victory. He was named Big South Conference Player of the Week on March 3.

"I try not think about stuff like (where I'm hitting in the lineup)," said Gasparro. "I'm just trying to get better-and-better, week-to-week."

Gasparro was also named the Big South Starting Pitcher of the Week on April 30, 2018. He's posted a 5-12 career record at UNC-Asheville with a 4.79 ERA, starting 25 of the 31 games he's appeared in. He's struck out 91 batters in 124 innings.

He went 14-4 on the mound with a 0.96 ERA in his high school career at Hopewell Valley, amassing 164 strikeouts in 116 innings. He also batted .416 in his scholastic career. Greg was named the Colonial Valley Conference Player of the Year his senior season in 2016 when he also was named to New Jersey's All-State team.

