

Bulldogs Baseball: Where Little Sluggers Play Like Major Leaguers

By Joe Maniscalco

Some kids have a natural affinity for numbers and can compute complex trigonometric functions off the tops of their heads. Other kids can lay their hands on a violin or piano and let their fingers fly as if they were a seasoned virtuoso.

Then there are those kids who can get hold of a bat or a ball and make you believe you might be seeing the makings of another Willie Mays or Sammy Sosa.

So what do area parents do when they realize they might have a budding Amazin' Met on their hands and not just a lovable Bad News Bear?

If they're like Anne and Peter Berg of Park Slope, they contact the Bulldogs baseball league. The three-year-old Bulldogs league is an outgrowth of the 78th Precinct Youth Council. Try-outs are tough and only the finest players make the cut.

"We took only the 14 best 78th Precinct kids during that first year," said Bulldogs manager and founder Marc Lussier, 38.

"He loves it," said Anne Berg of her son Sam, 9. "He's already decided he wants to play for the Yankees."

Young Berg may dream of being a Bronx Bomber, but it's a Brooklyn-born Met who's helping him cultivate his skills. Mets star reliever John Franco has been instructing the Bulldogs standout in the finer points of the game at his one-year-old sports center located at 800 3rd Avenue in Bay Ridge.

"Sam has been coming down since November. He's very good. Very ahead of his age group," says Franco. "He's one of the few young kids who can go into our fast [batting] cage."

Berg shares his big league mentor's enthusiasm. According to his mom Anne, he's already promised his parents seats in the

dugout when he becomes a major leaguer.

But even if her son doesn't get that far, Anne Berg believes Sam is getting something more out of his experience with the Bulldogs. "What we have is an unusual circumstance. We know he [Sam] is very talented. But I wanted him to learn that it's important to never give up in life," said Berg. "I want him to know that even if you lose and things don't go your way, you can go on with your life."

Sam Berg joins about 50 other kids in three age divisions that make up the Bulldogs league. There's the cub division for nine- and 10-year-olds; bantam for 11- and 12-year-olds and the grasshopper division for 13- and 14-year-olds.

Unlike intramural baseball, the bulldogs' schedule is less like little league and more like the major leagues. They play a grueling season of almost 100 games that begins in April and goes all the way to October. Said Lussier, "These kids are just as hungry at the end as they are in the beginning."

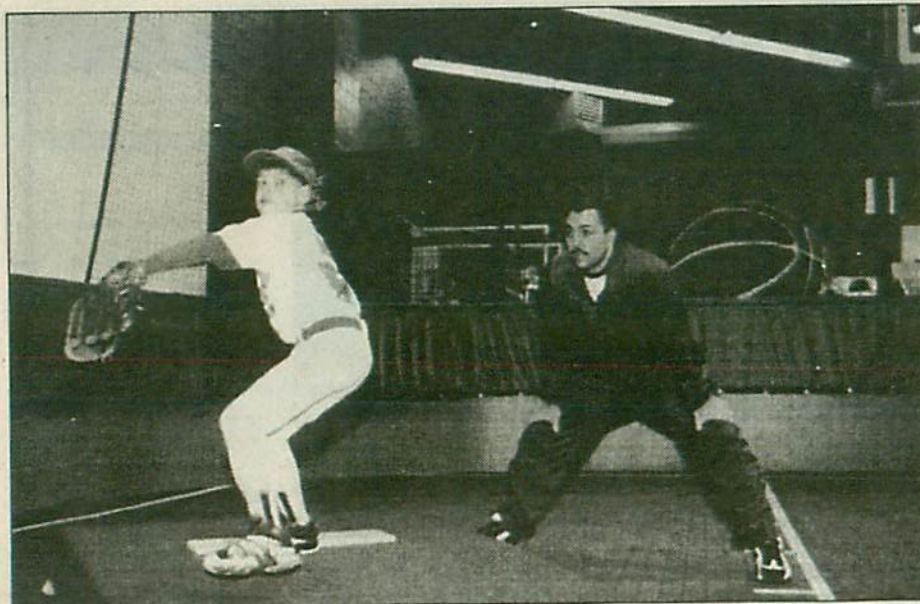
"That's the thing about this league. We wanted baseball that went throughout the summer. And not just ending in June," Lussier said. His own outstanding player son plays in the grasshopper division.

Lussier, a screen artist when he's not on the field in Prospect Park with his Bulldogs players, has been coaching for seven years and is very dedicated. He began coaching his



A winning team: (left to right) John Franco, Sam Berg and Peter Berg.

Photos by Dave Burns.



Mets pitcher John Franco (right) checks out Sam Berg's (left) form.

son in the 78th Precinct Youth Council. "It makes me feel good to see the kids enjoy themselves. My wife says it's my first love," he quips.

Road Team

The Bulldogs are a traveling organization, which means that its young players have the opportunity to visit other teams around the borough and beyond. "It's great they get to meet a lot of different people," said Lussier.

One of the highlights of the Bulldogs season is when the boys from Brooklyn pack up

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Baseball's Bulldogs...



Are among Brooklyn's most prestigious and serious ball players (being coached here by none other than the Mets' John Franco.) Find out about these major minors...**See page 18.**

Photo by Photo Trends

Tryouts For Premiere Brooklyn Baseball League

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and head for the citadel of baseball and home of the Hall of Fame, Cooperstown, New York.

It's a seven-day tournament that happens every summer in which the local lads get a chance to take on teams from all over the United States and Canada. Not only that, but they also get the opportunity to play in a big league-styled stadium and -- if they're good enough -- win a spot in the Youth Baseball Hall of Fame.

Parents interested in giving their baseball-

loving kids a shot on the Bulldogs roster should contact Lussier at 832-2431. Try-outs are scheduled to begin at the Prospect Park baseball fields at the end of the month. Lussier has yet to finalize the exact times.

While the league is co-ed, there is currently only one female player with the Bulldogs. Maybe your daughter could be the second.

League fees, which include uniforms, run about \$250 to \$300. All travel expenses are extra.

That travel can take the kids as far away

as Puerto Rico where the championship games are held for the American Baseball Conference. Last year, the Bulldogs' bantam players were one game away from going to the island World Series. The National Amateur Baseball Association, the other organization the Bulldogs compete in, holds its championship games in Orlando, Florida.

According to Lussier, the Bulldogs usually only pick up about 16 new players for each age division. "Everybody wants to be on this team," he said. "I wish I could take more."