

Hamilton Says Life Is a Coach

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Leo Hamilton figures he's found the Fountain of Youth. His source is baseball. In 10 years of coaching teams in the Sandy Koufax and Mickey Mantle leagues and 21 years of coaching American Legion teams, the 64-year-old Tulsan has compiled a phenomenal won-loss record of 904-331.

That's a winning percentage of .732.

"I like the game. Being around youngsters keeps me younger, I hope," said Hamilton. "You never know how long you're in (this world)." Hamilton's work hasn't gone unnoticed, either. In fact, he turned down an opportunity to manage Beaumont in the Texas Louisiana League this year.

He says his current team, Mack Truck, has the "best sponsor" in American Legion baseball.

"Perry Harper (owner of the Mack Truck dealership) is one of the finest men I've ever met," said Hamilton.

Mack Truck, until the organization was absent for five years in Legion baseball, used to sponsor Memorial High School athletes. Now Mack Truck is a Kellyville-based club.

While Hamilton never has won a state tournament, he's guided Mack Truck to that level two out of the last three years.

But victories and losses aren't what motivate Hamilton.

Over his managerial career he has watched the development of such players as Toronto catcher Charlie O'Brien.

"I had Charlie for three years in the Mickey Mantle league and a season in the Sandy Koufax," said Hamilton.

O'Brien wanted a two-year contract with Atlanta, according to Hamilton, and when he didn't get that, he signed for two years with Toronto.

"If O'Brien had a chance to play regularly, he'd hit for average," said Hamilton. "He's got power and is a good defensive catcher."

Hamilton thinks O'Brien, who was Greg Maddux' catcher last season at Atlanta, may be the clue to the slow start by the Braves ace this season.

Pitcher Jimmy Rogers is another of Hamilton's proteges. He currently is 1-3 for Toronto's triple A affiliate at Syracuse of the International League.

Hamilton's latest player to enter the professional baseball ranks was catcher Brad Evans of Glenpool. Evans signed with St. Louis and joined the Cardinals' class A club at Johnson City, Tenn.

While that gave Hamilton a measure of satisfaction, he was equally pleased by pitcher-outfielder Chris Pingry of Glenpool and Sapulpa pitcher-utility infielder John Simmons, who signed Friday with Neosho County Community College of Chanute, Kan.

"I'm not concerned about victories and losses," said Hamilton. "If I can help the youngsters earn a college degree by playing baseball and having fun, that makes my day."

Hamilton said O'Brien's brother, John, who played at Oral Roberts University, was one of the best pure hitters he had ever seen.

"John broke in with the Cardinals, but they released him after a back injury," said Hamilton.

John O'Brien, used at first and third base at Rio Grande of the Texas-Louisiana League, hit .276 including 21 homers last year.

"John hit 17 homers at LaFortune Park in American Legion action," said Hamilton.

It may seem ironic that Hamilton is managing Mack Truck, which is currently in fourth place in the American Legion race. He retired

in 1987 as a truck driver in the moving business.

"I feel I have as good a team as anybody has," said Hamilton.

"Still, you must have talent if you're going to win. Casey Stengel is a perfect example of that during his stay with the Yankees. He had the talent and he won."

Kirby Hogue, veteran umpire in the Tulsa area, is the director of American Legion baseball at LaFortune Park.

"I've known Kirby for a long time," said Hamilton. "I always tell him he's a director to me, but never an umpire."


It's a family affair, too, in American Legion baseball. Hamilton's wife, Deanna, is the scorekeeper and assistant coach for Mack Truck. During Sandy Koufax and Mickey Mantle league days, Hamilton enjoyed coaching his stepsons, outfielder Mike McCormick and second baseman Dick McCormick.

Hamilton even follows up on his pupils. He and Deanna went to Dunedin, Fla., to catch Charlie O'Brien in spring training.

Hamilton's greatest satisfaction is seeing his players advance in the game and using their talents as a springboard for life.

And those nights when he's coaching at LaFortune Park.

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