

Middletown North honors a special umpire and his colleagues at Jimmy Griffin Classic



Chris Hoffman is a coach who has believed in using sports as a way to help people in need, while giving his players lessons that go beyond the games that they play.

Over the years, the former Manalapan and current Middletown North softball coach has hosted events that have raised money for causes like a rival coach battling cancer, a cancer-stricken teacher at Manalapan, a disease affecting the children of an athletic director from another school, and a softball alum from a major rival who was severely injured in a ski accident. He's also had his teams host tournaments that raised money for autism research, and also for a scholarship fund that honors a late coach and teacher from Middletown.

"Whenever there's anything, we try to get involved in it or host it ourselves," Hoffman said. "I like to make sure that all the teams I've coached have all been on board, and they can't wait to do those things because it becomes more than about softball. It's good for the kids, the school district and the town. We'll try to help wherever we can, whenever we can."



His efforts went in a different direction on a recent Saturday, when Middletown North played host to the 1st Annual Jimmy Griffin Classic, which also involved the Shore Conference Softball Coaches Association and members of the Shore Umpires Association, as the local softball community paid tribute to Griffin, a beloved umpire and Middletown resident who died in 2020.

Admission proceeds from the day, along with entry fees from a JV tournament at Marlboro, will fund a set of Jimmy Griffin scholarships that will be presented to deserving Shore softball seniors. The umpires who worked the tournament at Middletown North also donated their fees back to the scholarship fund as a tribute to their dear friend and colleague.

The umpires went into the tournament knowing about the salute to Griffin, but were totally surprised to find out that they were being recognized as well. Between one set of games on the eight-game schedule, a ceremony took place where many of the assembled teams gathered on the foul lines, while the umpires stood inside the pitching circle.





They were individually announced to applause, and each umpire stepped forward to receive a plaque, framed gift and pair of gag eye glasses.

“The umpires aren’t often honored,” Hoffman said. “It’s usually the other way around between us coaches and parents. Sometimes they get the short end of the stick. But they put in their time and their effort. There’s a huge umpire shortage, and in particular at this tournament, umpires are coming here to do two games each, and are donating their time and giving back. We felt it was important to honor them and talk about and recognize them.”

The players taking part took notice.

“I got to see umpires in a way that I haven’t really seen them before,” said Middletown North player Maya Yesalonis. “I never really thought of what they’re going through when they’re actually on the field and doing their job. I’m used to seeing the game from my perspective, so it was good and opened my eyes. It makes me forgiving when I don’t agree with something.”

“It was a chance to see the other side of the story,” added Middletown North’s Grace Gomez. “We’re always here playing and they’re giving us the rules. But honoring them gives us a different perspective and really helps us respect them more.”

It was a day that was truly in the spirit of NJSIAA Sportsmanship Appreciation Week, in which showing respect towards officials is an essential component. The week runs through May 14, and is sponsored by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy.

To earn a Jimmy Griffin scholarship, a softball player must complete an application that demonstrates how they have maintained a positive outlook on life while overcoming adversity. The criteria emulates the qualities displayed by Griffin, who was 73 when he passed away. A Hall of Fame athlete at Middletown, he was originally a physical education teacher who became a police officer in his hometown. He retired from that job in 1984 due to a service injury, opened a deli, and was able to return to his police duties in 1993. He battled colon cancer starting in 2009, and in the midst of that fight, was critically injured in a 2014 motorcycle accident that resulted in the loss of his left leg below the knee. Neither the cancer or the loss of the leg stopped him from umpiring.

“He was truly one of kind,” said veteran umpire Nancy Co-Perez. “I carry his mass card in my pocket every single game. He was humble and funny, and a dear friend.”

The idea of the scholarship was a collaborative effort between a group of Shore Conference softball coaches and Griffin’s widow, Lisa.

“This kind of started at the Senior All-Star Game at the end of last year,” Hoffman said. “Laura Borrelli (Jackson Liberty), Ryan Pringle (Ocean Township) and Nick Scalzo (Marlboro) came up with it, with the help of Jimmy Griffin’s wife, who wanted to do something for kids.”



“Jimmy was all about overcoming adversity,” Pringle said. “The scholarship is a nice thing for somebody we all really loved. This event is also a great way to show appreciation to the umpires. Their numbers are down, so we have to continue to build our relationship with them so that they feel appreciated. It’s not an easy job, which is why we’re not getting the same turnout from umpires that we used to.” One of the dedicated umpires who worked two games and donated her time at the Griffin Classic was Karen Hartnett, who thoroughly enjoyed the times she spent working with Griffin, and their accompanying friendship. She’s been involved in officiating for 40 years.

“He persevered through so much,” she said. “This was a great day. It was very nice. When Chris does something, he really goes all out, and the people that are involved from the coaches association do a great job with this as well, honoring people and remembering people. Giving a scholarship to a girl for overcoming adversity and fighting through it is a great way to honor Jimmy. He loved the game just like the girls do, so it will be a wonderful honor.”

