

Ball presentation a unique tradition at Bergen County tournaments



Bergen County is a home to some intense softball competition, but it's also a place where teams recognize and respect the work that everyone, even rivals, put into the game.

Part of that was on display on a recent weekend, when both Ramapo and Immaculate Heart Academy held tournaments that feature what's become a unique tradition, and worthy of recognition as part of NJSIAA Sportsmanship Appreciation Week, sponsored by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy, which runs through May 14.

Interestingly enough, it's an idea that has its roots in Florida and Wisconsin.

It was more than a decade ago when a third Bergen school, Saddle Brook, went on a spring training trip to Disney World. One of its scrimmage opponents was a team from Wisconsin, whose coach contacted then-Saddle Brook coach Darren White with the idea of a team t-shirt exchange after the game. The Wisconsin coach also passed along something else that his team practiced - presenting a special softball to the opponent his players deemed was its most valuable player.

White loved the idea, and brought it home to Saddle Brook.

Saddle Brook in those years hosted its annual HOFs Tournament (The name is an acronym for Hope, Optimism, Faith and Survivor, and recognized beloved assistant coach Charlie Hofsaes). White made it a part of the event to gather the players from both teams near home plate after every game, where each side presented a inscribed ball to an opposing player it chose to recognize as its best from the game.

The idea impressed one coach in particular, Anthony LaRezza from Immaculate Heart Academy. LaRezza was starting his own invitational event at IHA, and he made the post-game ball presentation a part of that tournament as well.

The ceremony took on greater meaning in 2016, when LaRezza passed away from cancer complications two months before the season. The IHA tournament was renamed the Anthony LaRezza Invitational, and carrying on his various program traditions took on a greater meaning for the team and its new coach, Diana Fasano, who played for IHA and was also LaRezza's assistant. The ball presentation thus became an even bigger part of the event.

Meanwhile, the HOFs Tournament moved from Saddle Brook to Ramapo in 2021, when White became coach there. The ball tradition made the move as well.



“I love doing it,” White said. “All of these tournaments have intense games, and it’s nice way of ending it. And it’s become a tradition. It also means a lot to the kid that receives it because it comes from the other team. They’re being recognized for something they did that impressed them.”

When it comes to the tournament that takes place at Immaculate Heart, the MVP ball presentation has a double meaning because of the link to LaRezza, who was only 50 years when he died unexpectedly coming off of a state championship-winning season. When fellow coaches paid tribute to LaRezza after he died, they most frequently cited his appreciation of sportsmanship and respect for the competition.

“You’re recognizing a player who had a good day,” Fasano said. “It’s something that’s really important to us. It is always important to respect the game and your opponent. Anthony was intense on the field, but acknowledging your opponent in wins or losses is a crucial part to sportsmanship.”

When Immaculate Heart defeated Cranford, 6-4, at the LaRezza Tournament, the IHA players chose Sophia DeMarco, who was 2-for-4 with two doubles and two RBI, as the Cranford ball recipient.

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“It feels good that they picked me out,” DeMarco said. “It’s nice.”

The Cranford players, meanwhile, chose Cara Kochakian of IHA to receive the award after she went 3-for-4 with a double in her team’s victory.

“It makes you feel special,” she said. “It’s working with the other team in a way, and it shows sportsmanship among both teams. It’s a great way for all the teams to come together. Especially playing good teams, there’s kind of a rivalry going in and it gets serious, but at the end it’s nice to break it down and be friendly with each other.”

