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Rye umpire's career honored

Rye umpire honored for 31 years of service to Little League

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John Sexton, right, is being honored with the Katie Mickle Award for his 31 years as a Rye Little League umpire.

By **CASEY SULLIVAN**
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RYE — I can still remember what it was like as a 9-year-old baseball player. I can remember my first at-bat, when my knees felt like they were going to collapse at the sight of infamous 12-year-old pitcher Mike Drummond taking his long wind-up.

I can remember crouching behind home plate, decked in the catcher's gear that was comically large for my scraggly body, the helmet weighing heavy on my neck before the game even started.

"It's a great day for baseball," I heard a voice behind me say. Struggling to turn myself around in my cumbersome attire, I saw the umpire peering out at the field with a satisfied smile.

Then, he looked at me.

"What's the most important part of your job?" he said.

And, before I could find the words, he answered for me: "To protect me!"

I later learned this man was John Sexton.

Sexton has been a Rye Little League umpire for 31 years and has never had a child who played in the league. What keeps him coming back year after year? Everything.

"It's like a Norman Rockwell setting," he said Friday evening, just before a District II 11- and 12-year-old All-Star tournament game between Portsmouth and Rye at Flash Jenness Field. "You've got all the dogs running around, and the trees and the kids. It really is a beautiful setting.

"When that national anthem plays, we umpires are fidgeting," he added.

Sexton said the most fulfilling part of his job is being around the kids — because for him, umpiring is not a job. It's a way to live out his childhood.

"When I'm out there, the oldest kid on the field is 57," he said. "We (umpires) haven't hit that adulthood yet."

After Sexton's father died when he was just 5-years-old, he grew up looking up to Little League officials as role models who once told him the same words he told me as a nervous 9-year-old player: "It's a great day for baseball."

Sexton said the words allowed him to shake off his pregame jitters and just enjoy the game of baseball.

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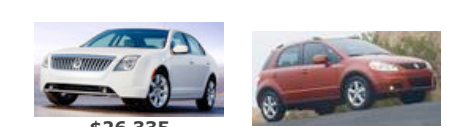
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They had a similar effect on me some 12 years ago.

Years after playing in the Rye Little League himself, Sexton began umpiring at the age of 26. Now, he has been awarded with the annual Katie Mickle Award for his years of volunteer service to the baseball community. Sexton is the eighth recipient of the award.

The award was started in 2000 when Mickle, the president of Portsmouth American League, died of pancreatic cancer after serving the Portsmouth Little League baseball community with years of selfless dedication and volunteer work to keep the league functioning as well as possible. Each year the award honors an outstanding volunteer in District II baseball.

"It's a prestigious award," said Rye Little League president Bob Monahan. "She devoted a lot of her time not just to the American League but to the whole league. It was a year-round passion for her."

Monahan has been working for Rye Little League for 10 years, and five of those years he has spent working directly alongside Sexton as an umpire. Monahan said that Sexton is the reason why Rye Little League has been able to function so well over the years.

"He's been a coach, a manager, an All-Star coach, chief umpire and he's been on the board of directors. John implemented a lot into this league to make it what it is today," he said.

According to Monahan, Sexton implemented the league's draft system, designed the evaluation process to evaluate players for the major leagues, and was an integral leader in putting together the league's board of directors to make important decisions.

"Without all that, you can't have a league," Monahan said. "It would be very disorganized. Without that type of leadership, any league wouldn't survive."

Yet a lot of what Sexton brings to the Rye Little League community goes beyond the nuts and bolts of its structure and functions. It's the attitude and values he brings to the field that make him a hero to both players and parents.

Sexton has had shoulder operations, knee operations and even undergone heart bypass surgery — after being rushed to the hospital from Flash Jenness Field during a heated day of baseball. Yet, he has still come back to the field every year since.

"People have all sorts of problems," explained Sexton. "People have physical problems, financial problems, emotional problems, marital problems, but when it comes to Little League — when it comes to the kids — many people put those aside and go out and do it."

"I'm fortunate that most of my issues are physical," he added.

Sexton expressed gratitude and humility upon the recognition of his volunteer service, saying that he accepted the award on behalf of everyone in Rye who has volunteered their time for the league, be it snack shack workers or the president of the league.

He thanked the parents for letting him play with their kids.

"There are so many lessons that I learn from the kids," he said. He recalled that he once coached his daughter's soccer team that had three consecutive "perfect" seasons: 0-32.

"I would say to the parents, 'I've never left any field a loser,'" he said, despite the team's poor record. "Because it's inside. I played. I put the equipment on. I tried. I did what I could."

"Many people think after a game the scoreboard says, 'Loser,'" he said. "No, it didn't. It said, 'Lost the contest.' 'Ran out of time.' 'The score was different.'"

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