

REMEMBERING A ‘GAMER’

By Joe Matlen

“Nice play, Nick, way to go!”

“That’s it, Dylan, you’ve got ‘em now!!”

“Here we go, Devin, it only takes one!”



The sounds of a youth baseball game in Elk Grove, California on a spring or summer evening. A setting that is played out over a dozen times a week during the season, but this time there was more drama than anyone knew. Sure it was a playoff game, so there was a tenses feel in the air. But this Elk Grove Babe Ruth game at Sheldon High School a few years ago had a sub plot that none of the players, parents or coaches, save one, knew about. Watching in obscurity this day stood a father, taking in the sounds and sights of youth baseball that he had not dared to witness for several years because of the painful memories.

Those memories revolve around a dynamo named Tyler Routt, a baseball-loving kid like many others he grew up with in Elk Grove. Tyler played baseball since he was nine years old in Bambino, which is now Cal Ripken, then moved up to Elk Grove Babe Ruth for the 13-15 years, and even to Senior Babe Ruth for the 16-18 years. He played with and against Mike Tonis, Brett Crandall and a host of other recognizable names in his hometown. He once struck out 18 batters in a Bambino game and once hit two home runs and made a game saving catch.

Tyler played ball in the back of his parent’s property, which his Dad made into a baseball field. He invented a game called ‘feltball’ when the family spent summers in Lee Vining. He loved four-wheeling and golf and going to San Francisco Giants games. As parents of active kids have experienced, the household was jumping with Tyler, his brother Jason, and their friends playing sports and just having fun from dawn to dusk, with minor interruptions for school, homework and chores.

Tyler had some rough times along the way – blood transfusions at birth, a broken nose at age 11, and a bicycle accident at age 13 that left him with a fractured skull and without hearing in his left ear. But he had a sense of humor and a lust for life that was contagious. He had a soft side, too, that showed up in full force when he cried after hitting a batter while pitching. The score or anything else didn’t matter; he was sick about hurting someone. Tyler’s sense of sportsmanship was one of his major strengths. He was a fantastic teammate, who genuinely cared about his team.

Then in March of 1998, while out with some friends to get something to eat, Tyler was killed in a tragic automobile accident. He was only 21 years old.

David and Kathy Routh, Tyler's parents, and brother Jason have slowly put their lives back together since that awful day. As a memorial to Tyler, they have sponsored a team in Elk Grove Babe Ruth's spring season every year since then through their business, Routh Roofing. Their contributions have made it possible for dozens of kids to play baseball. They even walked into, by pure coincidence, a Routh Roofing team having their team party at Pizza Bell one day.

Which brings us back to the 2003 playoff game at Sheldon High School. Despite sponsoring all those teams, this was the first game that David Routh had actually attended since Tyler played. Being smack in the middle of the youth baseball experience was not easy. He fought back tears thinking about all the good times Tyler had experienced. No one at the game could have known how difficult it was for this spectator that they didn't recognize. The one coach who knew, Tom Kilbride, a long time youth coach in Elk Grove, had provided the invitation. But even Tom could not imagine the emotions filling David on the sidelines as the Routh Roofing team lost that playoff game. And that emotion had nothing to do with the score.

Many years later, Routh Roofing is still sponsoring Elk Grove Babe Ruth teams. But after a lengthy battle with the city, they were forced to sell their property, including the baseball field with base paths that have long since disappeared, to make way for a new interchange at Sheldon Road and Highway 99. It appears that they will even move out of Elk Grove, which is a loss for the community.

At the inspiration (and perspiration) of Doug Penney, player agent for Elk Grove Babe Ruth, the league conducted the first annual Tyler Routh All-Star classic in 2006. There were four games played on Sunday, May 7th at Jones Family Park in Elk Grove. The idea was for the league to select players that are 'gamers' – those who bring a love for the game and a strong dose of energy and enthusiasm. Essentially, four teams full of players who represent the qualities of Tyler Routh. David and Kathy were there to throw out the ceremonial first pitches and to receive good wishes from the youth baseball community. Hopefully, they saw a little bit of Tyler in the faces of the boys competing in his honor.