

## THE MENTUS GAME

with Ron Mentus, RLM Athletics



**M**any coaches would be only too happy to recount the numbers of wins, championships and honors bestowed upon them or their teams. The impression is that victories, titles and awards are the most vital ingredient by which to measure sports. Winning or coming in first often upstages sportsmanship and character.

But at least one high school coach in Connecticut—Shaun Ratchford—maintains that there are more important things than the mere outcome of a baseball game. For 28 years Ratchford has been the head coach of the Danbury Hatters at the largest high school in the Constitution State.

What's more significant, even above a state championship in 2004 or the several division and conference titles Ratchford and his teams have garnered, is the atmosphere of sportsmanship and character that permeates the entire squad. Those qualities extend from the coaching staff to the players on the freshman, junior varsity and varsity rosters.

It all starts with the head coach, of course. But what's quite evident from viewing the well-organized, energetic and quick-paced practices to the actual games is that these Hatters all appear to be on the same page. Famous football coach Vince Lombardi's well-known quote that "Winning is the only thing"

doesn't quite ring the same bells with this group.

"Winning is overrated," Ratchford says. "We don't want to set goals that deal with our results. We want to set goals that deal with the process. We want to be the hardest working team and the team that practices the best together."

That overall outlook of balance, an even-keel approach to the game and of not overemphasizing results, is shared nearly point for point by his coaching staff. Watch a regular practice session and any observer would conclude that there is a difference in this team's approach and preparation. There is no screaming, yelling, ranting or raving as well as no profanity-laced diatribes.

"Shaun and I share the same philosophy in that we're teachers," says assistant coach Ken Reed, who has been on the staff since 1990. "If someone does something that we don't like, we certainly point it out to them, but we kind of run a low-key operation. We treat them like men and we expect a lot from them.

# There's More To Winning Than the Score



**Coach Ratchford**

And we think they expect a lot from us, and that combination works pretty well."

Ratchford oversees every aspect of daily practice sessions. Each player is handed a sheet of the day's schedule, which often includes a key word to inspire and set the tone for the ensuing activities. For instance, one session's key word was farmer. The coach's reasoning was, "The farmer has to toil every day or his crops and livestock don't produce. Work like a farmer!" The players may have chuckled but they got the point.

Junior varsity coach Sean Colley once played for Ratchford. A graduate of Roger Williams College, the 29-year-old Colley is in tune with the head coach's methods and emphases for next year's potential varsity players.

"They want to play on the varsity, so my job is to prepare them for what I know Shaun's going to expect from them," Colley said. "He trusts my perception of the kids. I really respect that (because) it gives me the use of my coaching skills without being dictated on what to do.

"Coach always talks about the process. Play the game right and the results will eventually be there. That's what he has imparted to me and (it) has changed my philosophy and the way I think about baseball."

Jim Curnal, an assistant varsity coach, once played minor league ball in the New York Yankees' system. He sees his role as a mentor in developing and improving the players' skills as the season progresses.

"I enjoy helping kids get better," he says. "I think I'm pretty good at analyzing fundamentals and skills that are necessary to compete." As for helping players reach the next level, he has some suggestions. "The first one is hard work and a desire to get there. The second is the ability and willingness to learn and a willingness to change." Athletic Director Dan Scavone has no



**From Left: Chris DelDebbio, Austin Calitro, Coach Shaun Ratchford, Mike Treglia**

qualms about Ratchford's coaching style or techniques. An AD with 10 years of experience, Scavone has every confidence that no matter what situation arises, Ratchford is more than capable of dealing with it in a fair and even-handed manner.

"He's a true veteran; he's got a routine established that's very organized and detailed," Scavone said. "He's the consummate coach. He ensures that these kids not only excel and improve their skills on a baseball field but that they become responsible, hard-working young men. He sets high expectations and expects kids to fulfill their responsibilities.

"He's very involved with the kids' lives here at the school (and) knows the academic and social situations that come up. He usually doesn't have too many problems with parents because he's up front and honest. He lays the groundwork. Parents know how he operates his team so he doesn't have a lot of issues."

Ratchford learned much from his father, Bill, who was once a state representative and a congressman and worked in the Bill Clinton administration.

"The thing I learned from him was that you have to be prepared for anything," Shaun said. "In sports, he taught me how to grind, how that your love of the game can still make it enjoyable even if you aren't the best player."

The family influence was notable. Shaun's mother, Barbara, played three sports and was a swimmer at the University of Connecticut. She was a high school teacher for 30 years. As a result, the activity of sports was prominent in his life from an early age. Along the way, he found that sports—not just baseball—often imposed some hardships that must be endured, by athletes and coaches.

"Sports measure you, it exposes you," Ratchford said. "Any mistake you make, everybody sees it. When you're willing to play a sport like baseball, you're going to be exposed to failure. The hardest part for us as teachers or coaches is to teach the team first that we're going to fail—a lot. It's the process, not about results. As long as they learn the skills through sports that allow them to be successful, that's success."

Wins and losses are part and parcel of the game. Neither Ratchford nor the coaching staff imply that striving to win is not an essential ingredient in the team's playbook. But how you get there and how you handle it is ingrained into every teammate. Again, the sportsmanship/character elements remain at the forefront.

"No, sportsmanship and character are not overblown," Reed says. "A lot of players who are tightly wound, it's really difficult for them. What we emphasize in the way of sportsmanship is always respecting the other team. We hope that carries over to whatever they do."

Of course, Ratchford is not about to overlook circumstances where some elements of respect or playing the game the right way are occasionally disregarded. When that happens, he quickly steps in to handle or thwart a brewing situation. He did just that early this past season when one of his regulars was disrespectful to the coaches. He summoned the player and simply advised him to leave practice and go home.

"He won't do that again," Ratchford said shortly after the incident. While he's not one to make a scene—either with his players or umpires—the head coach of the Hatters is in firm control of all aspects of the team's operations. Discipline is something he believes in, from both sides of the fence.



**Chris DelDebbio**

"I'm not going to be a guy that gets in your face," he said. "Baseball does teach us discipline and that's one of the greatest things about the game. Discipline and believing in yourself, every player has to have that.

"Team First' has always been one of our rules. I want every player to think that we expect the same of him whether he's the number one or number nine hitter or came off the bench. We want him to focus and be a great teammate. (But) if we've taught him something and he doesn't execute, I'm going to let him know about it."

For the 2012 season, the Hatters chose tri-captains—Chris DelDebbio, Austin Calitro, Mike Treglia—to provide leadership and direction. While the team finished 13-9 and qualified for both the conference playoffs and the state tournament, the captains acquired some treasured memories beyond the

baselines en route to their final season in a Hatters' uniform. It was evident by the captains' responses that school and civic pride along with camaraderie were nearly on an equal par with the team's diamond success.

"I love representing the school," said DelDebbio, an outfielder and relief pitcher. "Being a leader on the team is a huge factor, because, to win, you need leaders to step up and take the bull by the horns.

"We want to come out and win every time. One of the big things is taking things from every game. To take the little things that we did right and work off that; the things we did wrong, work on them in practice so we can improve."

Calitro, a burly catcher, savored the friendship of his teammates, many of whom have been baseball buddies for several years.

"We've all been on the same team since we were eight or nine years old," he said. "It's been like a dream to come here and play. Winning makes the team happy; every time the team's happy, it puts a smile on my face."

Treglia, the diminutive slick-fielding second baseman, epitomized the team's high standards of behavior. He was named the team's Sportsmanship Award recipient and was tabbed the Honorary Westerners Award by the city's franchise in the New England Collegiate Baseball League.

"It's prideful to come out here and represent 3,000 (students) in

the school, and Danbury's (81,000 residents),"

Treglia said. "Baseball is a marathon; you win

some, you lose some. When you lose you've got to come back out...and build on what you may have done wrong or capitalize on what you've done right. That's how you win games."

And most assuredly, the captains had some thoughts and memories of playing for coach Ratchford and his staff.

Said DelDebbio, "He's an amazing coach; I haven't met a smarter baseball man in my life. He really trusts his players. One of the things we need as young players is to pick the



**Mike Treglia**



**Austin Calitro**

# THE MENTUS GAME

coaches' brains because they're so knowledgeable about the game."

"He's tough on the ones he expects a lot from," said Calitro. "He expects a lot out of us because it's not about winning games as much as it is becoming great young citizens in society. That's what he really ties to baseball."

"Coach is very tough, but in the sense where it builds character (although) you might not like it," Treglia said. "At first he'll come down hard, but in the end when you look back and think about it, it makes you a better person. He does everything for a reason. He made me a better person, a better captain."

Through his 28 years at the helm of the Hatters, Ratchford's squads have probably won several hundred games. He claims he doesn't know the exact numbers, nor does he feel it is necessary to even consider such statistics. "If you take away the result end of it, it makes it a lot easier."

A special education teacher at the high school, Ratchford simply transfers his vast knowledge and feelings about education and academics to the playing field. For each and every inning, he insists that his players compete fairly to the utmost of their God-given abilities.

And when the game is over, the sun will rise the next day, parents will have to go to work or attend to daily chores, and the athletes once again become students.

"Wins and losses, they're overrated," Ratchford

reiterated. "I'm not saying I don't want to win, but I don't want to sacrifice a kid's career for a high school win. Winning doesn't mean that you're a winner—it's not even close."

No matter what that scoreboard displays after seven innings, the Danbury Hatters emerge as winners.

## 2012 Danbury Hatters Baseball Awards:

Sportsmanship Award:

Mike Treglia; Scholar Athlete:

Ash Rao; All-Fairfield County Interscholastic Athletic Conference:

Chris DelDebbio-OF; All FCIAC West Division:

Austin Calitro-C, Kevin Williams-P, Marquise Marrero-SS, Rob Bonacci-3B, J.P. Dennehy-RF; All FCIAC Honorable Mention Jack Zanine-C, Nick Goetz-RF, Corey Brosz-P.

**Ron Mentus was awarded Collegiate Baseball's Sportsmanship Award in 2002. He is available to conduct seminars/clinics and accept speaking engagements on the topics of sportsmanship and character. Contact him at: 203-740-7986 or [rlmathletics@aol.com](mailto:rlmathletics@aol.com). RLM Athletics is located in Brookfield, CT.**



Mike Treglia, Austin Calitro, Chris DelDebbio



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