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Perfect baseball record from '61 still a treasure as players reunite in Norfolk

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Alson Kemp holds up a trophy he received in 1961 when his baseball team, the Junior Comets, had an undefeated season. He traveled to Norfolk for a team reunion from his home in Hertford, N.C.

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On a Norfolk baseball field in 1961, the Junior Comets achieved a feat that Jim Neas says is inexplicable.

"It was almost eerie, the way we won," he said – every game in the spring and summer seasons.

The community league team reunited last week, 56 years after its 26-0 miracle year.

"I can see it like it was yesterday," Neas said.

His teammate Bill Lackland had the idea for the reunion.

He tracked down and called Allen Face, a fellow Junior Comet who lives in Sleepy Hollow, Ill.

"I hadn't seen Bill in 25 years," said Face, 69.

Lackland, who lives in Charlotte, flew to Chicago to visit Face.

They did "what old people do," Face said. "Relive our glory days. It occurred to us that that was a special year. Let's see who's alive, let's see who's dead and let's see if we can't get some of the guys back together."

They started their search.

Six Comets convened for the reunion: Lackland; Face; Jim Neas of Chesapeake; Gary Ricks and Ted Lee, of Virginia Beach; and Alson Kemp of Hertford, N.C.

Neas, a retired Coast Guard captain, was the team's 13-year-old catcher. Face is a concrete engineering consultant. In their undefeated year, their teammates were all 12 and 13. They practiced and played and quickly concluded: the Junior Comets couldn't lose.

"Guys get in a hot streak and they can't explain it and guys go into a slump and they can't explain it," said Neas, 70, who lives in the Western Branch section of Chesapeake. "There is magic in baseball."

Face insists that talent contributed, too.

"All of us were big hitters," he said. "We were fast as the wind."

They also followed their coach's instructions.

"Always hustle," Neas recalled. "And pay attention."

The boys seemed unstoppable. Their opponents marveled about it. Once, Neas bumped into one at school. "He said, 'Why can't we beat you guys?'"

Face's father was an assistant coach.

And "my mother attended every game, and she was the best and loudest cheerer," he said. "I can still hear her cheering from the stands, cheering us on, and that is very moving for me."

She also collected clippings from the Ledger-Dispatch.

"We used to get coverage in the newspaper like the major-leaguers," Face said. "Twelve-years-old, you hit a home run, you got a headline."

Neas still remembers one headline.

"Silent bats failed to ground Comets," he said. "We beat a team 4 to 3, and I don't know if we had more than one or two hits."

But no game stands out to Neas like the last one.

"The last game, the 26th game, I felt pressure," he said. "We played at night, which was unusual. The guy hit a pop-up right above the plate."

The ball traveled higher than the light poles that lit up the field and vanished into the night sky. When it reappeared about 10 feet from Neas, he lunged for it but missed. A foul ball.

"My heart sank," he said. "I failed."

His mistake emboldened the opposing team, he said.

"We came down to the last inning and they were ahead," Face said. "They knew we were undefeated." They had a chance to "beat the Comets and spoil their perfect season."

When Neas saw the batter hit another pitch, he braced for a loss.

"But our compact second-baseman somehow transformed himself into an Elastic-Man character from a comic book, stretched, and snagged the ball at the last split second," Neas said.

The Junior Comets, of course, went on to win.

The players reminisced about it at their grassroots reunion last weekend at the field outside Mary Calcott Elementary School, where the Junior Comets often played and practiced. Six gentlemen showed.

They brought old photos and newspaper clippings. They laughed and swapped stories.

Lee, a semi-retired contractor, said the reunion was important: "I hadn't seen most of those guys in probably 40, 50 years. I only actually recognized, right off the bat, one of them. ... We not only played baseball together but we fished together, we did everything together."


Their reunion reinforced a truth that Neas cherishes.

"Baseball's a great game," he said. "It's the only game where time doesn't matter."

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