

New Lineup Changes for F

focus COVER STORY

First Colony Little League, one of the premiere Little League programs in the United States, is well under way for another exciting baseball season. And, like any league or team, it's

always looking to improve.

It's already gaining new attention this spring for a couple of reasons:

- Shane Reynolds, one of the Houston Astros' star pitchers for many years, is president of the league.
- The Dream League has been added.

And, Roger Clemens, already a baseball legend and Houston Astros pitcher for the past three seasons, threw out the first ceremonial pitch for the Dream League as the FCLL started its 21st year.

These features have added new hype to a Little League program which already has served more than 11,000 First Colony youngsters in the past two decades.

The popular Reynolds has been a part of FCLL since he retired in 2004 after 13 seasons of major league baseball. He became one of 17 members of the league's board of directors last year, and was asked to serve as president in 2007. Shane and wife, Pam, moved to Sugar Land in 1992 when he was a rookie pitcher. They've been active in their community ever since. They have a 12-year old daughter Lauren and a nine-year old son, Ryan, who is a shortstop and a pitcher in the little league. Both children attend Fort Bend Baptist Academy.

The Dream League launches as a division of FCLL with solid support of many parents, Fort Bend ISD and The Arc of Fort Bend, to enable children with physical and/or mental disabilities to enjoy the game of baseball. There has been a Dream League in Katy for several years and another is being initiated this year in West University in Houston, as the only Dream Leagues in the Greater Houston area.

Reynolds heads up a busy program that involves 700 boys and girls, ages 5 to 12, with 62 teams. And each team includes

an adult as manager, at least two coaches, a team mom, and hundreds of parents who rally round.

"This program is truly a volunteer program," Reynolds said. "We just couldn't make it work without all of these volunteers," he said. Every member of the board has important specific assignments to make certain that whole system works correctly including registration, drafting of the players to the teams, scheduling of practices and games, and advertising and sponsorships.

Reynolds and the men and women who devote countless hours on the telephone and individual conversations, are headquartered in a second-story building office and boardroom off Austin Parkway and Settlers Way. The building is surrounded by five well-kept baseball diamonds.

The headquarters building is nearly 24 years old and in need of repairs, and the league is seeking assistance of the City of Houston to improve the facilities, Reynolds said.

There are bigger and perhaps older youth baseball programs, but First Colony is developing a tradition of community involvement where some of the young adults who came up through the program are giving back now by serving in various ways to the current youngsters. Reynolds recalls playing in his native Louisiana Dixie Youth program for a couple of years. There are scores of professional baseball players who got their start in little league programs.

It all starts with six categories: T-ball for kids ages 5-6; rookie, 6-7; peewees, 7-8; varsity, 9 years old; minors, 10-11-12, and majors, 11-12.

At the end of the season, the league picks an all-star team which enters a highly competitive district competition, with the ultimate winners going against other national and international teams in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. While no First Colony team has won it all at the Little League series, there are some Greater Houston and Fort Bend teams which did.

Reynolds recognizes that few of the youngsters who get their start in First Colony ever make it to pro ball as he did, but that's not the goal. The opportunity to play on an organized team with a nice cap and uniform, with coaches and umpires, and



The Dream League...

A LEAGUE WITH A HEART

By Wayne Chandler

"E very child deserves to play baseball and what better place to do that than right here in the heart of First Colony." That quote came from the letter which Steven Schoppa, former president of First Colony Little League, sent out last February, announcing the inaugural

First Colony Little League

an encouraging word from mentors and parents goes a long way to making it all a success. Reynolds and his board wants everyone—kids, parents, grandparents, relatives, friends, and neighbors to help make it a success.

Shane, born in Bastrop, Louisiana, in 1968, was one of the most popular starting pitchers for the Astros from 1994

through 2002, before spending a year with the Atlanta Braves, finishing the next year as an Arizona Diamondback. He won 114 games in the majors, all but 11 of them with Houston, and had a 19-8 won-loss record in 1998.

Now Shane and his family are in another league, and they're enjoying it, too. ☆



Seven time Cy Young award winning MLB pitcher Roger Clemens (L) and retired MLB pitcher Shane Reynolds pose for a photo during the opening ceremonies of the 2007 First Colony Little League season. Clemens was guest of honor during the event, throwing out the first pitch for the Dream League, a division of FCLL, which enables children with physical and/or mental disabilities to enjoy the game of baseball. Reynolds is president of FCLL.

season of FCLL's Dream League.

Some 54 boys and girls with special physical and/or mental needs have signed up and are participating, along with all the other First Colony Little Leaguers in a league called the Challenger division by Little League International which started the program in 1989. These special youngsters, ages

5-18, will have the same uniforms and caps and play on the same fields. Four teams for six games just as all the others.

"The games are being played in similar fashion to big league games, complete with the national anthem, players lined up along the baselines," Schoppa said.

Sports announcers from the Houston broadcasting community announce the play-by-play, and trophies will be awarded to all participants. Coaches and managers are FCLL dads who coach and manage teams in the league.

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Roger Clemens, "The Rocket", seven time Cy Young award winning pitcher, presents an autographed glove to 12-year-old catcher Jack Krueger after throwing out the opening pitch of the First Colony Little League (FCLL) season. Krueger is participating in the inaugural year of the Dream League, a division of FCLL, which enables children with physical and/or mental disabilities to enjoy the game of baseball.

Photo by Frank Casimiro

The Dream Team is another halo for those First Colony LL volunteers

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"They are donating the additional time to assist this special group of players," Schoppa said. Some players on nearby high school teams are coming out to help coach on these Saturdays.

Then, some 70 youngsters from the First Colony teams have volunteered to help the Dream Leaguers both on and off the field. "They're called 'angels in the outfield,'" he adds.

The regular FCLL umpiring crew will staff each game. "Our goal is to make this the most fun these players have ever had and a memory for their lifetime," Schoppa said.

The Dream League has come to fruition, largely because of Schoppa, Julie Diaz and Al and Donna Danto. Last December these parents started spreading the word throughout the community about their plans for this special league, hoping to raise enough money to support four teams. "Within days this dream became a reality all through word of mouth in this community," Schoppa said. "We view this league as a dream for all of those who participate. Thus, the 'Dream League,'" he said.

Al and Donna Danto had a special incentive. Sugar Land residents, their children have participated in baseball, hockey, volleyball, golf... Their nephew, Connor, who lives in Round Rock, TX, has been an inspiration to the Danto family. Connor, a special needs child, has been one of the biggest supporters of the Danto children, sitting in his wheelchair, yelling louder than anyone else and cheering each player by name. Watching Connor in his first year of baseball in a similar league in Round Rock, was the motivational spark for the Dantos to help create the First Colony Dream League.



Steve Schoppa



Donna Danto

The sponsors came quickly: Arc of Fort Bend, Sun Tate's Colony One Auto Center, ADC Communications, Communication Enhancement, The Ferillius family, Wheels of Fun, Southwest Printing, Southwest Irrigation Systems, FBJSI, the Clines family, Liver Specialists of Texas and "A Special Friend of A Dream League."

Families and friends who sponsored a player: Bruce and Jan Hicks, JR and Savitha Rao, Taylor Schoppa, Steven Schoppa, Rob and Julie Diaz, The McCauley family, Gary and Linda Edmiston, Al and Donna Danto, John and Connie Harmon, Curtis and Sarah Koop, and Brian and Jennifer Sullivan.

Schoppa served on the FCLL board during the years when his son was a player, and has helped developed the league to its current reputation.

The Dream Team is another halo for those First Colony LL volunteers.

As an added once in a lifetime privilege, some of these First Colony Dream Leaguers and their "angels" have been invited to participate in the flag ceremonies of the opening of the Little League International Congress on April 13 in the George R. Brown Convention Center.

Little League district administrators from around the world will attend the congress and have a voice in rules and regulations for the current season. ☺