



The OFA Blue Devils and Friends reunion resembles a cross between Duck Dynasty extras and the House of David touring baseball team. They gathered in Terrace Park in 2018.



Reflections of a River Rat:

A band of OFA brothers will gather
for a few laughs, bonding, and Wiffle Ball

An odd caravan of vehicles will descend on the roads around Morristown this Thursday. Before 7 a.m., an assortment of beards, muscles, beerguts, sunglasses, sneakers and T-shirts will pile out of their trucks and sedans, perhaps bearing an out-of-state license plate, perhaps in full costume, for a golf tournament at Langbrook Meadows Golf Course.

By noon, this swarm as thick as shad flies will travel to Terrace Park, the old Methodist campgrounds on a level spot along the English Settlement Road. This group is a middle-aged collection of former OFA athletes, a cross between Duck Dynasty extras and the House of David baseball team, who reunite annually on the last Thursday of July, come rain or shine, heat wave or cold front.

You'll know this band of brothers by their yellow Wiffle Ball bats.

It's the 30th year of the Blue Devil and Friends Reunion. That title might be a little formal because there is no formality in this event. No invitations. No registrations. Only word of mouth. It's a bizarre nine-hole golf scramble followed

by the main event – a three-man Wiffle Ball tournament that likely will crown a champion between 7 or 8 p.m.

This reunion is the brainchild of buddies Scott Sargent and Matt Caufield, who



Matt Caufield and Scott Sargent grew from college-age buddies into scholastic coaches.

bonded over basketball during the summer of 1991 at SUNY

Potsdam's Maxcy Hall. They became housemates and best friends, then began traveling to 3-on-3 tournaments around the Northeast.

Always looking to compete at any kind of sport, they called a few friends and organized a Wiffle Ball tournament in 1993 at Caufield's family cottage, owned by his grandmother, Annette McNally. It has grown and morphed into a can't-miss -- some would call it sacred -- gathering of former OFA athletes and their friends.

"It's not about winning, it's about celebrating another year together,"

said Sargent, a sixth-grade mathematics and science teacher at Heuvelton.

Caufield, an eighth-grade math teacher at Canton, echoed the sentiment. "It's an excuse to enjoy a day of no worries with friends that you haven't seen in a year's time and take in the camp and the memories."

Call the Wiffle Ball tournament anything you like – epic, awesome, legendary. The memories make Caufield and Sargent chuckle.

They couldn't agree on the greatest catch, but two stand out as much as Willie Mays' back-to-homeplate grab at the Polo Grounds in the '54 World Series or Ron Swoboda's rightfield dive when the Mets beat the Orioles in '69.

"Billy Hosmer chased a towering foul ball over the hill," Sargent remembered. "He made the greatest catch we have ever seen."

Hosmer didn't realize the land past the left-field line sloped sharply into a tangled thicket of bushes, thorns, rocks, and assorted beer cans.

He dove full out ... and emerged from the underbrush with the ball.



Scott Sargent umpiring, Satch Sawyer catching and Matt Caufield batting at Jim Booth Field.

"He had to leave immediately," Sargent recalled. "He's a hemophiliac and he had to go get treated. He had cuts everywhere."

Caufield recounted an equally notable catch. The ball was sailing toward his neighbor's A-frame cottage so the fielder took off determined to make the catch. If the ball struck the cottage, ground rules allowed the ball to remain in play.

"This guy is going 100 miles an hour," Caufield said, "then the ball hits the peak of the A-frame and is coming down."

The fielder didn't recognize the dog-run line strung through the yard. It caught him around the neck, flipped him, and he completed the catch while lying on the ground.

Caufield said the play was punctuated by OFA JV football coach Jerry "Satch" Sawyer "slow-clapping, and everyone joined in."

Traditions have evolved and cemented themselves over the 30 years. The format has changed from two-man teams through a blind draw into players choosing three-man teams. Only trademark Wiffle Ball bats and balls are slow-

pitched. The ballfield is named for Jim Booth, Caufield's longtime neighbor who passed at age 69 in 2011.

Caufield enters as the defending champion with teammates Rick Harper, who to



hoist the same cup that Jarrett Langstaff and Chris Rufa first won 30 years ago.

"That trophy is a story in itself," Caufield said. A couple of participants spotted it at a wedding reception at the local Holiday Inn on the eve of the first tournament. This was not the claret jug, but more like a bronze cup with handles. They figured it would make a lasting

showpiece, so they boosted it. They planned to return it, eventually, but the hotel went out of business.

Former OFA basketball player Colin Merna, who settled in Penfield after a four-year career at Rochester Institute of Technology, is credited with building a plaque from the remnants of a table. The winning names from every tournament are included.

The early-morning golf scramble has an identity too. Sargent contrives a bizarre rules sheet that must be followed at each hole. On one hole, you might have to putt with a pool cue. On the next hole, you might drive with your putter, then putt with your driver. Or play a hole with a set of kiddie clubs.

"The guy who owned Deerfield said our rules were unreal. Can I have a copy?" Sargent said. "I make them up every year, and nobody knows what they are doing until they show up that morning."

"We have never been kicked off a golf course," Sargent said. "We have guys showing up in full costume. But who else delivers a large group of guys at 7 in the morning. We're good for business."

In recent years, the tournaments have added a charitable aspect. A few years ago, former *Ogdensburg Journal* sports reporter Steve Heaton lost his house in a fire. The boys of summer pooled some money and donated it. They did the same last year for an old friend struggling with cancer.



To a man, participants gush about the loyalty, friendships and camaraderie.

“I can't skip the tournament without cause because I need to live with myself afterward,” said Merna. “We all serve as our own judge and I wouldn't be able to live at peace if I simply didn't show up. I have missed the tournament before but only on account of the most serious family obligations.”

He'll be there Thursday with his Blue Devil family, and friends.

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