

SPORTS & OUTDOORS

Sandsharks turn back Future of America



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Defense and nine runs over the second, third and fourth innings spelled victory for the Sandsharks, who improved to 2-0 with a 9-1 victory over Future of America in Friday night's rec league softball game of the week at Tom Nevers.

After being retired one, two, three in the first inning, the Sandsharks found their groove, plating three runs in the second inning, four in the third and two in the fourth to round out their scoring. Jeremy Wagaman was the story on both offense and defense for the Sandsharks, going 3-4 with three runs batted in while recording eleven put-outs at shortstop where he anchors the Sandshark infield. Future of America, who dropped to 1-1 with the loss, scored their only run in the sixth inning after Ben Butterworth was plated by a Josh Galvin single with one out.

The Sandsharks were flawless defensively, scattering just seven hits over the seven innings, none of which went for extra bases. "We have been playing really well on defense to start the season," commented Sandsharks manager Wagaman after the game. "We have some new faces this year, and everyone has fit nicely into their roles and we've had positive results so far." The Sandsharks won their first game in similar fashion, soundly defeating Wolfhound in an 11-2 contest.

Wagaman got things started for the



MICHAEL GALVIN/The Independent

Despite the sure hands of Future of America's Ben Butterworth, the team fell to the Sandsharks last Friday. Ready in the outfield is Leah Day.

Sandsharks in the second inning, doubling deep to right, moving Liz Merendino, who reached on a walk, to third. Leigh LeClair followed with a

single bringing home Merendino and moving Wagaman to third. First baseman Colby Roberts blasted a double over the head of Future of America's

left fielder scoring Wagaman for the inning's second run. After two consecutive outs, Coco Philips singled home teammate LeClair before the side was retired.

The third inning was more of the same as the Sandsharks dialed up four more runs to extend their lead to 7-0. Jackie Laurenti began the inning with a single and went on to score on a Wagaman single to right. Merendino scored second for the Sandsharks, driven home after Roberts singled to left. Roberts, along with Wagaman, were each plated by a two-out single by Brandon Keeley.

Sandshark pitcher Steve Blashfield got in on the offensive action singling to spark a two-out two-run rally to help out his own cause. Blashfield and teammate Kyra Taylor, who also singled, were each plated by Wagaman's third hit in as many innings, bringing the Sandshark run total to nine, where it would remain.

Future of America collected themselves defensively for the final three innings but their bats continued to be quieted by the stingy Sandshark defense. "They didn't make mistakes," said Future of America manager Butterworth. "We suffered from suspect defense for a few of those middle innings, but we dug in and played sharp the last few. What I think really hurt us was the bye week we had. A week off is an offense-smothering vex, especially early in the season when we haven't really settled in." ■

CROQUET

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since found common ground on the croquet lawn. "Finn and I played in an impromptu tournament last year, the 'Fifth Wicket Tournament,'" Glowacki said. "We have gotten together a couple of times."

Well, maybe more than a couple of times. "Mike and I were playing three to four times a week through the fall," Murphy noted.

What is it about this game that can get even seasoned politicians to see eye to eye?

"It doesn't take as long as golf, you can't get hurt and it's very sociable," Murphy attests. "And there is no gender difference."

"It's one of the few sports where age and sex don't matter," Glowacki agrees. "When you go to tournaments there are people in their 80s and 90s playing."

Glowacki first got the croquet bug about 20 years ago, when he and his friends played the casual game that most people are familiar with. "It was just something to do hanging out in the backyard," he recalled. About six or eight years ago he discovered the more challenging version. "Somebody saw a video about the 'American Six-Wicket' version, what they call the new croquet — six wickets with a stake in the center. You have to cut the grass very close, like a putting green."

Murphy came to the game about two years ago. "I had a large expanse of grass and I was looking for something to do with it," he recalled. "I wanted something to do for a little relaxation." He, too, had played backyard croquet as a kid, but investigations on the Internet uncovered something a little more intriguing. "I went to the United States Croquet Association Web site," he said, "and I learned to play

the proper game."

The biggest visible difference between backyard croquet and the new croquet is the size of the wickets. The game Murphy and Glowacki play features wickets that allow only 1/8th of an inch of leeway for the ball to go through.

You also don't "send" your opponents. You, instead, says the U. S. Croquet Association's Web site, "strik(e) the striker ball in such a way as to make both balls move."

It seems a lot more complicated than the old, nine wicket "guerilla croquet" we're used to.

"There is immense strategy involved," Murphy says, to which Glowacki adds: "It's a combination of billiards and chess played on grass. It is the ultimate comeback game — it doesn't matter what the score is until the game is over. It's just great fun."

Out at Westmoor, tennis pro Wayne Davies is also a relative newcomer to the sport. "When I arrived three years ago, the owner said, 'Right. There's a croquet lawn and you're going to teach people how to play.'"

Accepting the challenge, Davies studied up on the game, initiated the Nantucket Invitational and began practicing. The seven-time court tennis world champion took to it so well that he was named the 2006 Rookie of the Year by the U.S. Croquet Association.

"I find it fascinating," he says. "The playing area is 105 feet by 84 feet — that is big. To be able to control the ball to do what you want it to do takes a lot of skill. Any weekend of the year, there is a croquet tournament going on someplace."

And to what does he attribute croquet's surge in popularity?

"Oh, I would never call it popular," he laughed. "But on this island, there are probably a half-dozen croquet lawns."

Or, to be more precise, greenswards. "My greensward is a little bigger than half-court size," Glowacki said, tongue firmly planted in cheek. Come July, he says, he'll be ready to organize contests at his home again.

Murphy also hosts regular croquet matches at his half-size court, where the creeping bent grass is finally filling in perfectly after two years. The beauty of the lawn — excuse me, greensward — is part of the game's allure, and maintaining it part of the dedication the sport requires. Murphy has "a core group of 10" who play regularly, and up to eight can play at a time in doubles competition.

Murphy even has a custom-made mallet, with a heft that emphasizes its importance.

Like that other summer game — baseball — croquet heats up in Florida in the winter. The national croquet center is in West Palm Beach, where last winter Glowacki and Murphy traveled with family and friends to hone their skills. Davies has been there, too, of course, as have Rilice and Al Lefton.

Which takes us back to last weekend's tournament. In riveting play that drew 10 participants, it came down to four players: Murphy, Courtney Green from Topsfield, Mass., and Rilice and Al Lefton. In the final match, Murphy squared off against Al Lefton. And the winner?

"It was very close," Lefton said when it was over.

"It was a fight to the death," Murphy said. "You need nerves of steel in this game."

Ultimately, Murphy prevailed. After the toast, the players settled in for lunch; all very civilized, of course. "Any chance I get to wear white I do it," Green said.

It was the second Nantucket Invitational for Murphy who "didn't even place" last year.

"They'll all be gunning for me now." ■