

COACHING HIS WAY - LeFebvre Method Turns Pitchers Into Winners

By LAURIE THOMPSON | July 05, 1986

Ron LeFebvre opened his baseball and softball training school in a San Pedro barn using dingy, hand-sewn fishing nets for batting cages and fishermen's sons for students.

It was just a wintertime experiment to dodge the rain.

That was 20 years ago, when indoor baseball wasn't much more than a good joke among Southern California players.

"They thought I was crazy," LeFebvre said. "Some of the pros I knew called it 'LeFebvre's chicken ranch.' They had to shoo the cows and everything else away in order to get indoors."

But this was serious business to LeFebvre. It still is.

After all, he doesn't hoard stacks of kinesiology and child psychology textbooks for nothing.

He keeps lesson-by-lesson computer files describing the physical makeup and progress of his students.

He even spent four years in the early 1970s assisting a pathologist in autopsies, just to study human muscles directly.

And he has developed his coaching methods accordingly.

"Let me ask you this," he said. "How do you train a body if you don't know how the muscle functions? It's impossible.

"If you're going to do it right, you cannot train a human body to move unless you know how that muscle or the muscle that moves that particular limb works."

Then you make it work.

This year's LeFebvre prodigies include softball pitchers Patti Russell and Sandra Schoonover of Woodbridge High School and Nicki Luce of Cypress High School.

LeFebvre's daughter, Susan, graduated from Cal State Fullerton with a 36-1 record this spring and was named the top softball pitcher in the College World Series.

"It's kind of hard separating father and coach," Susan said. "When he's training me, it's a coach-student relationship, but he has some advantages being my father because he knows me emotionally."

LeFebvre's methods have earned him the esteem of his colleagues.

He takes a student from an early age and teaches the pitching motion, making adjustments as the pupil grows older.

"He teaches a really high kick in the pitching motion. That's how you tell a LeFebvre pitcher," said Gordon Mullens, former softball coach of Cypress High School.

Said Pete Manarino, Long Beach State softball coach: "You can certainly tell a LeFebvre pitcher by the style, by the way they lean back and by their windmill technique."

Actually, the term LeFebvre pitcher turns LeFebvre's stomach.

"There are no two people born alike," LeFebvre said. "You can't be trained, you can't be dictated to, nor can you be formed in a different manner. Now, it is up to a particular coach to find your natural motion, your natural rhythm and your natural movement."

And he no longer coaches in a barn. His main school is in a warehouse in Orange, though he has more than 2,000 students in this school and others in Northern California, Nevada, Hawaii and New Mexico. He also offers clinics in Europe and Japan.

Though his staff totals almost 40 people, only 14 actually teach. The rest are in training to teach. LeFebvre requires that his assistants work under him for four years before they are allowed to give one-on-one lessons. Five of the 14 are senior instructors who travel and supervise operations at LeFebvre's other schools. LeFebvre spends his afternoons hopping from lesson to lesson, supervising his instructors as well as instructing. He says he has coached each student at one time or another.

He prefers to leave team coaching for the team coaches.

"It's not our business to interfere with the coaches," LeFebvre said.

Said Butch Edge, assistant softball coach of Rancho Santiago College: "We respect what they do, and vice versa. They send us nice young ladies that can play the game."

And gentlemen.

About half of LeFebvre's students are boys. LeFebvre coaches the Sea View League's co-Most Valuable Player, Saddleback High School pitcher Jeff Rowe, and El Toro's Richard Faulks, who played in the Orange County all-star game.

LeFebvre says that some of his students have signed professional contracts, though he refuses to name them.

"He won't tell anybody names of his pitchers in the major leagues," said Kenny Krahenbuhl, one of LeFebvre's students and a pitcher for Cajon High School in San Bernardino.

Why?

LeFebvre says there are too many egotistical people running around, trying to take credit for what others do.

"I don't believe in it and I will never do it," he said. "I have always told my students that there is no way that I will ever live off of your name."

It's irrelevant to his business, anyway. LeFebvre trains novices. No matter how much effort it takes.

He sometimes gives lessons until 1 a.m. on a Thursday, then takes a plane to Honolulu and begins a weekend clinic Friday morning.

He coaches deaf, retarded and handicapped students and some students who can't afford to pay.

"You can't turn a child away and embarrass a child because he doesn't have the money," he said. "If the child has the ability, then I will give lessons to him. I don't care. We make money here and we make money there, and if a child hasn't got it, we go from there."

He puts a few demands on his students, however: No bad attitude, no bad grades and no participating in other sports.

Russell discovered the rules when LeFebvre learned that she played volleyball.

"I used to come in after volleyball practice all tired and he'd say, 'When are you going to quit that stuff?' " she said.

If demands aren't met, he simply tells the student to find a new coach.

Said Marc Di Carlo, another student and pitcher from Cajon High School: "He coaches more like a father, and if he has to yell at you in front of the whole place, he'll do it."

Like any father-coach, he lets his students call him collect anytime. For any reason.

LeFebvre said he once received a 3 a.m. phone call from the Lakewood Station of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department telling him that a student had been arrested for burglary.

The youngster said he wouldn't speak to anyone else and wanted LeFebvre to come get him. His mother wasn't home. LeFebvre drove to the station, posted bail and took the youngster to his house for the night.

A swift lecture ended that scenario, and it never happened again.

For LeFebvre this, too, is part of coaching.

He said that he would rather teach a child who needs a lot of work than someone who needs only a little.

"Most coaches, especially in the pros, they take the young man in, and the kid is phenomenal. He's just absolutely phenomenal, and they're going to coach him?"

"That's not coaching. Coaching is taking somebody who can't even take a ball in their hand, can't even throw a ball three feet. Can't even bat a ball, they're so afraid."

And starting from there.