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2009 Season Preview from A-Z



The law enforcement softball circuit is a microcosm of Major League Baseball. Just like the MLB we have our ample share of disputes, drama and egos. The “hot stove” was sizzling all off-season with talks of player movement, team mergers and speculation into all things deemed worthy of speculating about. That being said I want to share my A to Z all-inclusive 2009 “hot stove” synopsis and season preview with you.

A: Albert Davis. Albert is a Florida lawman who has played competitive softball for elite teams

such as Kanes/Worth and Fence Brokers. News broke this off-season that Albert would be suiting up for the South Florida Lawmen in '09.

B: Brett Helmer. No, Brett is not a cop. But Brett and Easton Sports are huge supporters of law enforcement softball. This year Brett and USSSA director Armando Acosta are sponsoring 3-4 Easton bat-provided law enforcement tournaments.

C: Cathedral City. Cat City is the home of the original Big League Dreams facility and the venue for the past four

Policesoftball.com World Series events. Unfortunately we have simply outgrown the facility. This will be our last year there as BLD has given a verbal commitment to move us to the larger Las Vegas or West Covina site in 2010.

D. Delaware Association of Police/DAP. D.A.P. fell off the radar in '08 when their leader and several key players parted ways. This off-season they brought everyone back and are poised to be a major force once again.

E. Economy. The economy has already had a negative impact on the ability of teams to secure sponsors.

F. Florida softball. '09 will mark the thirtieth and final year of the Rick Hall Memorial tournament hosted by Robbie Freitas and the Jacksonville Police Softball Club.

G. Gold. There will be additional “Gold” level tournaments for ranking purposes due to the new Policesoftball.com rankings format.

H. Home Run King. If you haven't seen the home run challenge between Policesoftball.com champion Jeff VonLutzow of the LAPD Blue and Brett Helmer you can find it on youtube.com. A lot of very talented individuals would like to unseat VonLutzow and get a shot at Helmer come October.

I. Iowa Lawmen. Most think Iowa is a wrestling state but these boys

can play ball. They opened some eyes last year in Vegas and I think they might be the surprise team of the year.

J. Jacksonville Police Softball Club. Top ranked team in the East the past three years. Will somebody knock them off the totem pole this year?

K. Kevin Reese. Kevin has been the director of the prestigious Wouters/Sawyers Memorial Sterling Heights, Michigan tournament for several years but has turned it over to Andy Wurm and Andy Pawlik.

L. Loyalty. It was hotly debated all off-season. There has been more player movement than in the past and some believe the desire to win has trumped loyalty.

M. Maryland State Police. The talk of the off-season is how much the MSP team improved last season. They became legit



heavyweight contenders after winning the big Dayton Nationals and placing well in every tournament they entered. Was it a flash in the pan or can we expect more from these juggernauts in '09?

N. New York. The Big Apple was full of big drama all off-season. The NY Metro club added former NYPD Blues stars Dan Spinelli and James Ruocchio to their already loaded roster. In a counter move, their cross-town rivals the Blues added elite player Butch Crozier and his teammates Bill Kerry and Casey Crandell from the defunct Central New York squad.

O. Ohio Lawmen. They have a few probation officers on the team and many East tournaments do not consider them “law enforcement qualified.” Rather than compete without these players the Ohio Lawmen have built their schedule around tournaments that do recognize their status.

P. Pitching. The Michigan Lawmen added pitcher Mike Panackia to their roster who, coupled with Jeff Graus, will be the one-two punch softball equivalent of C.C. Sabathia and Mariano Rivera on the bump. The Cal-Quake added All-Star Matt Boykin who, coupled with Lowell Buck, will be the California version of John Lackey and Francisco Rodriguez. Just like the MLB, pitching was a priority this off-season.

Q. Quintin Lewis. Lewis joined the Folsom-Sac squad in the off-season and is rapidly becoming known as one of the best outfielders on the circuit. He's a big addition for the JCat nation.

clearing the bases

with Brett Helmer • Sponsored by Easton

Softballers, about three weeks ends away. That's how close we are to the start of the 2009 softball season. The major USSSA schedule kicks off this April with a double NIT in Kissimmee, Florida on April 16th, where we're expecting 30-35 teams for a four-day stretch that could see some teams playing 12 to 13 games in a single weekend.

And despite a packed February and March on the diamond, I think it's safe to say everyone is looking forward to four days of nothing but softball.

To recap a whirlwind last couple months – we just wrapped up a pair of Easton/Brett Helmer "Bring Ur Real Skilz" tournaments in California to close out the month of February, including a police softball "Real Skilz" at Chino Hills' Big League Dreams park (Feb 21-22) and another at the Riverside Big League Dreams park the same weekend.

We had almost 90 teams going – definitely a great weekend for ball. Even though I spent almost as much time in the car as I did at the plate, it was well worth it and was a great way to ramp up heading into March.

March highlights included the 8th Annual Jim Wessel Memorial Bash for Cash in Cincinnati March 13th through the 15th, plus the tail end of Softball Magazine's Spring Training Event in Cocoa Beach, Florida March 18th through the 22nd.

We had over 200 teams at the Bash for Cash for the third straight year, which was really a great milestone for Easton. We got involved with the Bash for Cash about six



years ago when there were less than 100 teams - to see how the tournament has grown is really pretty impressive. I remember heading there on a Friday night years ago with one or two guys for a home run derby - now we've got 25 to 30 of the best players in the game crushing the ball - we've come a long way together.

Brian Wegman and I helped tutor about 50 guys - we ran clinics, helped them with their swings, plus got in some game work. There were a lot of other manufacturers involved, ensuring these guys got not only some great coaching, but also the equipment to match.

Speaking of which, get ready for Easton's new line of 100-plus mile-per-hour bats - there's a foursome of bats built for USSSA ball players this year, including a new Stealth and Synergy. Guys are always making comments that they love the feel of some of the older bats

we made, so we went back to our roots and will be putting out a product they're going to be very happy with.

It's going to be a good year to be an Easton-sponsored team.

Beyond the softball diamond this year, we're thankfully closing in on the 2009 Major League Baseball season - I'm honestly excited to start watching these guys play, rather than listen to all the garbage that's come with this Winter from steroids to contract disputes. And the icing on this cake will be a handful of Easton-sponsored guys practically in my backyard - reigning AL MVP Dustin Pedroia of the Boston Red Sox, plus a nice new signing for use - David Ortiz. Those guys are studs and we're excited to have high-caliber guys like Dustin and Big Papi using Easton products.

Hope you're as pumped for this month as I am,

Brett

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R. Rosters. The issue of open/closed rosters is once again a topic for debate with no foreseeable resolution. Status quo for now.

S. SoCal Alliance. My team has won the past two World Series titles and believe me, we feel that big old target on our back coming into the '09 season.

T. Team Texas. The consensus is these guys have all the talent in the world but don't play in enough tournaments to get into the spotlight. Hopefully we will see more of them in '09.

U. Uniforms. Less than five years ago it was rare to see teams in matching uniforms. Now the majority of teams are fully decked out and looking sharp. In '09 expect to see the next wave of softball vogue including full sublimation jerseys, high-end roller bags, and custom pants.

V. Vegas baby Vegas! The Baconball Vegas tournament has become a sort of unofficial kickoff for the non-California based teams. This year's line-up for the March event boasts a murderers' row of talent including Michigan Lawmen, Sac Police Softball, NY Metro, Jacksonville PSC, Hard-Cor, Montgomery County Young Guns, Motor City Blues, etc.



W. West Coast Aftershock. They burst onto the scene last year but went through a major personnel overhaul in the off-season. It will be interesting to see if they can duplicate or better their impressive '08 campaign.

X. X-Ray. Slugger Andy Williams had an X-ray of his injured knee and it was determined he would have to undergo extensive surgery. Unfortunately the surgery did not go as well as hoped and Andy announced he would most likely be shelved for the '09 season.

Y. Young Guns. A few years ago I profiled the young guns of police softball. It's about time to do it again because there is a truckload of youngsters ready to leave their mark on the game. More to follow...

Z. Zero. The number of tournaments that have been completed as of press time. I just briefly touched on A LOT of information related to law enforcement softball, which is impressive since not one single tournament has been played this season. I believe all this off-season banter is a testament of how highly anticipated the '09 season is to the players and supporters of the law enforcement circuit. It looks like we have a lot to look forward to this year and as always I will do my best to keep you in the loop...from A to Z.