

Imagine sitting in Minute Maid Park in Houston, watching the Astros play the California Angels. Houston's Justin Verlander is pitching to Angels outfielder Justin Upton. Two Virginia natives who have reached the pinnacle of baseball. Did you see them play as teenagers?

Wally Beagle did. So did dozens of volunteers, spectators, and a small army of baseball coaches and scouts. Upton, Verlander, Brandon Lowe and Ryan Zimmerman are current big-leaguers who played in the Commonwealth Games baseball showcase. Dozens of former major league players are also on the list of 1,920 players who have been part of the showcase event in the last 29 years. About 120 men have served as coaches in that time.

This year marks not only the 30<sup>th</sup> year for the event, but its 27<sup>th</sup> with Beagle at the helm.

"I was the assistant for the first three years, then I took it over in its fourth year," Beagle said.

At the time, the games were being held at Cave Spring High School in southwest Roanoke County. They moved to Salem's Kiwanis Field in 1997 after the Salem Avalanche (now Red Sox) of the Carolina League vacated the old park for a new stadium. With valuable assistance from Salem's Recreation Department, the showcase was held there until the entire Commonwealth Games slate moved to Liberty University five years ago.

"The rec department in Salem took care of me," Beagle said. "The staff at Liberty now do a good job, too. They take care of the mound, and they have a trainer on site all the time."

The mound at Liberty is about all that a grounds crew needs to deal with since the field is turf. That can be a problem in the July heat, but it sure comes in handy if the weather poses issues.

“You can get playing again on a turf field really quick if you have to come off for rain,” he said.

Time is of the essence in the showcase since the entire event is scheduled within a 48-hour time frame.

Medals are handed out, but the baseball showcase is not a traditional baseball tournament. There are four teams that represent regions of Virginia. Players are nominated by high school coaches then invited to try out for the regional team in their area. Beagle said no more than two players come from any school and the coaches must construct a team based on player positions and pitching needs.

“With a round-robin format they play three games in such a short time that pitching is always needed,” Beagle said.

The players are high school sophomores and juniors, mostly 15 and 16. They usually continue playing baseball past high school.

“I’d say 80 to 85 percent of the players are either drafted or play in college, with most playing college baseball somewhere,” Beagle said. He estimates that over 160 players have been drafted out of high school or college.

That’s why the showcase has always drawn dozens of professional scouts and college coaches. “We get many scouts or coaches, this year we expect 35 to 40, but there are still a lot of people watching these games for the talent they need.” This year the production staff at

Liberty University will stream all 8 games, so scouts and coaches from a far can tune in. It's also a nice perk for family and teammates from back home to watch that couldn't make the trip.

While travel baseball has cut into the number of players at try-outs and given scouts other places to look, Beagle said the Games still have a reputation for giving the best players in Virginia a chance to compete against the best.

"We might miss out on getting the guy who can throw 91 or 92 mph, but we'll still have guys throwing 88 to 90 mph," he said.

Beagle's leadership running the showcase has led to a nickname.

"My friend said they call me General Beagle on tournament weekend because I sit back and give orders," he said with a laugh.

A successful coordinator is a master at delegation. With about 20 volunteers a year – roughly 600 since the beginning in 1991 – Beagle knows their help is vital.

"Any coordinator knows you can't put on a sport without the volunteer help. The more you get to help the less work everybody has to do. I had great friends who don't mind giving up a weekend," Beagle said. "Of course I have to feed them, so I guess they work for food."

He said there's a long list of coaches who helped for several years running, then dropped out to let others enjoy the opportunity.

"I have to do an awful lot of administrative stuff. I furnish team meals, and I usually put together hotel room lists. Last year we had to let kids stay with parents and we're going to do that again this year.

“I do lunch on Saturday and Sunday. On Friday night there’s a pizza party before the first game,” Beagle said.

“I do all the equipment: a game t shirt, a “boys of summer” workout shirt, caps, all the equipment needed to play.”

After 30 years, Beagle still loves the Commonwealth Games showcase.

“I do it to watch these kids grow and mature, then get the opportunity to go to college. It’s exciting to see kids playing and get a chance to go on and play professional baseball,” Beagle said.