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Alpha Omega Sports Academy to Have Grand Opening Saturday



This is how it looks to hit against Pro Batter at Alpha Omega Sports Academy. Pitches come at the batter anywhere from 40 mph to 104 mph. Eight different pitches can be thrown and all simulate a real pitcher throwing the ball. TriCitiesSports.com photo by Ron Bliss.

By Ron Bliss
TriCitiesSports.com
February 1, 2008

Shannon Hopkins, Dr. Joseph Gunn and Dave Reynolds were friends with a common interest -- their sons' Tigers Baseball Club.



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It was from that acquaintance that they got the idea to build the new Alpha Omega Sports Academy that opened in January on Wilcox Court behind East Tennessee Cheer & Gymnastics.

Saturday, they will show the facility to the public at their Grand Opening Open House.

They will have a VIP event for area coaches from 10 to 12 noon and then will welcome the public from 12 to 3 p.m.

Refreshments will be served and demonstrations will be given of their Pro Batter pitching machine.

The facility is a product of need.

"We started talking about the need for an indoor facility," said Hopkins, a structural engineer at nearby Eastman Chemical, "and our coach, Rich Jordan, told us of a facility he was affiliated with in Colorado. So we decided to build our own. We put finances and our feet to the idea and here it is."

What they have developed is a first-class indoor hitting and workout facility that allows baseball and softball players to practice indoors while the snowflakes or raindrops fly outdoors.

And, as Hopkins points out, "this is not just a drop-your-coins-in-and-take-your-swings kind of place. We have state-of-the-art equipment like our ProBatter Professional Baseball System which combines Major League quality pitching with life-size images of actual pitchers throwing realistic pitches. In a unique process, the ball comes through the screen from the machine perfectly synchronized with the video image."

The ProBatter system is in one of three batting cages in the 10,000-foot indoor facility and is the only one of its type within a 200-mile radius of Kingsport.

"You can program eight different kinds of pitches, and the machine can throw them from 50 to 104 miles per hour," notes Hopkins.

The pitches are a cutter, a splitter, a fastball, a slurve, a slider, a curve, a sinker and a change of pace.

"The only thing it can't throw is a knuckle ball," said Hopkins.

Added Hopkins: "It throws a nasty curve. If you can hit the curves in here you can hit them anywhere."

The indoor batting cages, which can be used for either baseball or softball, are just part of the facility, however. Another half of the facility is a large, artificial-turfed area that can be used for fielding and even playing whiffle-ball games -- which Alpha Omega Sports Academy plans to make available for kids' leagues.

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"We plan to have an indoor Whiffle-Ball League," said Hopkins. "We can even play indoor hockey or LaCrosse. We can even have volleyball in here and speed training."

Also in the plans are a Fall Hitting League for those 40-over and 40-under.

"We also see the possibility of using it as a showcase for college recruiters, where they can come in and see the recruits work out," said Hopkins. "We can see ourselves as a recruiting center."

Reynolds said the idea started a year ago.

"Then six months ago we made the decision to do it," said Reynolds, who is an officer at First Tennessee Bank in Kingsport.

One of the first uses is for area minor league players to work out and get themselves ready for spring training. Among the minor leaguers currently using the facility are Ben Swaggerty, a former Tusculum pitcher who pitched at Idaho Falls in the Kansas City Royals' system last summer, and former Virginia High catcher Tyler Belcher, who caught Detroit Tiger rookie star Justin Verlander when both were at Old Dominion. He played for the Florida Marlins' system in Jamestown, N.Y., last summer in the New York-Penn League. Others include former Daniel Boone and ETSU star Jeremy Hall, who pitched in the Appalachian League last summer for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays' team, and Kevin Hammonds, another former Tusculum player in the Florida Marlins' system.

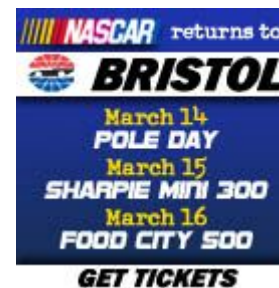
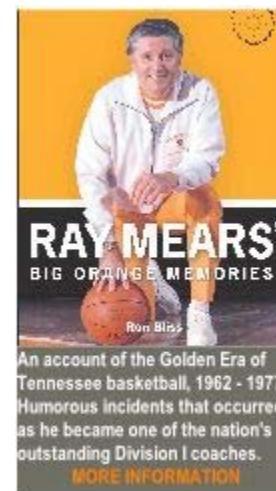
In the first week of operation, players all over the Tri-Cities, as well as Lebanon, Va., and western North Carolina, have visited the facility to work out.

Coaches are available to give lessons, private or group, in hitting, pitching, catching, position-specific training, speedology, vision training, and much more.

In addition to the batting cages for baseball and softball, they have a net for golf and have already had inquiries about that possibility.

Regular clinics are planned, including one set Feb. 23 that will feature L.B. Bailey, who was the pitching coach for the Greek Fast Pitch team in the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Greece. He also served as a coach of the 2002 Chinese National Team that competed in the World Championships. He will be at Alpha Omega to work with young area fast pitch softball pitchers. Cost for that will be \$100 for players and \$50 for coaches with a limit of 15 players per session. Registration closes Feb. 16.

Other upcoming clinics include Quickness, Speed & Agility Training each Wednesday night with Ben Swaggerty, a minor leaguer in the Kansas City Royals system from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m.; a pitching clinic on Feb. 16 with sessions from 9 a.m., to 12 noon and 2 p.m., to 5 p.m., with former ETSU players who are now playing pro baseball -- Jeremy Hall, who is with the Devils Rays; Steven Calicutt, who is with the San Francisco Giants' organization; Caleb Moore, who is with the Minnesota Twins' organizations; and Shane Byrne, who is in the Arizona



Diamondbacks' organization; and an Intense Speed & Agility clinic with Swaggerty on Sunday, Feb. 24 from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Prices vary with each clinic.

They held their Grand Opening celebration on Saturday. The facility is located at 1065 Wilcox Court in Kingsport, in the complex behind the "Red Apple".

For additional information on upcoming events, e-mail Alpha Omega Sports Academy at alphaomegasports@aol.com or call them at 765-9275. Their hours of operation are 3 p.m., to 9 p.m., Monday through Friday; 9 a.m., to 9 p.m., on Saturdays and by appointment on Sundays.



more . . . THE FRONT PAGE

- 18.FEB.08 [Historic First: King vs. Bluefield College Game On TV Tuesday Night 6-8 p.m.](#)
- 18.FEB.08 [Science Hill Claims District Title Over D-B, South Wins Consolation](#)
- 18.FEB.08 [Lady Devils Claim District Title](#)
- 18.FEB.08 [Doran, Harmon Win Blue Ridge Properties Honors](#)
- 18.FEB.08 [Christian Golf Association Season Set](#)
- 18.FEB.08 [Bucs Flying in Under Radar, Skole Expects Good Season](#)
- 18.FEB.08 [Greeneville Girls Win Title; Cherokee Places Third](#)
- 18.FEB.08 [Tennessee Ascends to No. 2 Just in Time to Play No. 1 Tigers](#)
- 18.FEB.08 [Handicapping Using the Daily Racing Form \(DRF\) vs The Race Program](#)
- 17.FEB.08 [D-B, Greeneville Continue to Lead TriCitiesSports.com Prep Basketball Rankings](#)
- 17.FEB.08 [Lady Vols Learn Lesson, Subdue Vanderbilt, 81-68](#)
- 17.FEB.08 [Vols' Colquitt Arrest Again, Will Lose Scholarship & Miss Five Games](#)
- 17.FEB.08 [Williams Wills South to Win, Named Lady Rebels Player of Week](#)
- 17.FEB.08 [Christian Golf Association, GKGGA Meetings Set This Week; Pro-Ams Get New Sponsor](#)
- 17.FEB.08 [Two TriCities PGA Members Win Statewide Awards](#)
- 17.FEB.08 [South JV Team Rallies for Big 9 Tournament Championship](#)
- 17.FEB.08 [Penske's Newman, Kurt Busch Finish 1-2 at Daytona](#)
- 17.FEB.08 [Lady Bucs Look to Keep Number One Seed Intact Monday Night](#)
- 16.FEB.08 [Golf Channel Amateur Tour Offers Local Play With National Reward](#)
- 16.FEB.08 [D-B, Science Hill to Meet for District I Boys' Title](#)
- 16.FEB.08 [Devils Cool Off Raiders in District Semis](#)
- 16.FEB.08 [Lofton Allows Vols to Escape Georgia, 74-71](#)
- 16.FEB.08 [Bucs Survive, Cling to Hopes for A-Sun Title, NCAA Trip](#)
- 16.FEB.08 [Hendrick Team to Dominate in 2008](#)

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