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A tough start for Post 7

Best Sports

## Long Ball program faces new challenges

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COURTESY OF LONG BALL PROGRAM

By By Bonitta Best

The Long Ball program is in trouble.

Not by its own choosing, mind you, but by forces beyond its control.

I've written about Long Ball since the program was instituted in Durham four years ago.

Back then, Minor League Baseball Charities (MiLB) was just starting the Long Ball initiative to bring baseball to the inner cities.

Thanks to Patricia Nobles, a single mother with a teenage son, Durham became the guinea pig for Long Ball's first league.

And when Durham Parks & Recreation discontinued its baseball league for 13- to 15-year-olds because of

cost, Nobles and other dedicated volunteers founded their own league to keep the young men engaged during the summer months.

After meeting with a MiLB executive at the grand opening of the renovated Historic Durham Athletic Park, Nobles was given the chance to run the Long Ball program.

The four years since have not been without its struggles, but the end results have been well worth it.

Nobles can tell you many stories of how the players are performing better in school and in their community. Her efforts were recently rewarded with an all-expense paid Alaskan cruise by Cabot Creamery.

But now it could all end.

With MiLB giving up control of the DAP to the Durham Bulls and leaving the area, the charity's part of the organization that was funding Long Ball informed Nobles it's cutting back support.

And wouldn't you know it? Long Ball's biggest expense is the one Minor League Baseball Charities is eliminating – the park's rent.

"They chose to cut out the main reason we are Long Ball. What good is a baseball program without a field to play on?" Nobles said. "It is the only field in Durham large enough for our older teams – with the exception of high school fields."

Not to mention the DAP is a gem for fans, too. I love going there. It's quaint, intimate and has a true baseball feel.

To its credit, the Durham Bulls reduced the rental fee from \$6,000 to \$4,000, Nobles said, but that's still not chump change if you don't have it.

On the positive side, since Long Ball is under MiLB, all contributions are tax deductible.

It's easy for anyone to help. Just write a check payable to MLC and put Long Ball on the memo line. Simple as that.

Don't make Nobles have to drop the ball on these young men.

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