

a packed house that included Shirley Povich's wife and family, the Big Train players jumped on the Arlington Senators with five runs in the first inning and cruised to a 7-2 victory.

In 19 seasons from 1999 through 2017, the Big Train has only failed to post a winning season once. I'll always be grateful to Jim Burt Jr. (Miami, BT 2001) for hitting a late inning grand slam on the road in Germantown on July 31, 2001 in the team's final game of the season to raise the team's record to 20-20 and avert what would have been the only losing season in Big Train history.

The Big Train's regular season record of 519 wins and 254 losses computes to an eye-popping winning percentage of .671. Baseball isn't like football. Very few baseball teams at any level win at the rate that the Big Train has for the last 19 seasons. The New York Yankees with a winning percentage of .579 have the best regular season record in major league baseball in the years (1999-2017) since the Bethesda Big Train began. The Cardinals at .555, Red Sox at .551, and the Dodgers at .539 are the next highest winning percentages in MLB over that time period.

According to our irreplaceable Big Train statistician Bill Hickman, Joe Torre has the best record among big league managers with more than 500 regular season decisions during the Big Train era with 1,108 wins and 795 losses for a winning percentage of .582. Torre bested such other MLB coaching legends as Bobby Cox (.557), Tony LaRussa (.553), and Terry Francona (.552).

So, move over, Joe Torre. Meet Derek Hacopian and Sal Colangelo.

Timing counts for a lot in life, and the Big Train was really lucky that Derek Hacopian, an All-American at the University of Maryland, was available to help set us on a winning path. Derek was a Churchill High School graduate who played three summers in the Clark Griffith League. As a member of the Maryland Terps in 1992, Derek turned in one of the most impressive college seasons ever, batting .490 with 23 home runs and 83 runs batted in. He won the ACC Triple crown on his way to being named Atlantic Coast Conference Player-of-the-Year. Over the next five years in the minor leagues, Derek was a three time league All-Star as an outfielder. When his pro career was cut short by injury, Derek turned to coaching and teaching baseball. Chuck Paris, his manager for the Reston Raiders in the Griffith League, called Derek "the best pure hitter I ever saw. Period." For the Big Train, Derek was the right guy at the right place at the right time.

One day in February of 1999, just months before our first game, Derek ran into Sal Colangelo at Montgomery Mall not far from where Shirley Povich Field was being constructed. Derek had known Sal from the Griffith League when they played on rival teams and asked him if he would be interested in being a coach for the new team. Sal had played baseball and football at Virginia Tech. I'm sure Sal could not have imagined that 20 years after that chance encounter at the mall, he would have a national championship, a Maryland State Amateur Coach of the Year Award, and six league championships on his baseball resume.



In six years in the Griffith League as the Big Train skipper, Derek notched 149 regular season wins against only 90 losses for a winning percentage of .623. His 2000 Big Train team had the best overall record at 29-11 in the Griffith League and placed second in the NABF College World Series. In his

sixth and last season as manager, the 2004 team captured the Griffith League regular season title with a record of 29-13 and won the league championship.

When Derek decided to step down as manager, Sal Colangelo stepped up and took over the head job of recruiting and managing for the 2005 season as we transitioned to the new Ripken League. In 13 seasons at the helm, Sal's Big Train teams have won eight regular season titles and six league championships. In 2011, the Big Train was named the nation's top summer college team by Perfect Game USA. Sal's 370 wins with only 164 losses computes to an extraordinary winning percentage of .693.

## CAL RIPKEN COLLEGIATE BASEBALL LEAGUE



### 7. What is it like to be an elite Division 1A college baseball player?

It's a grind.

A Division 1 NCAA baseball player's season starts in February and includes 50 to 60 regular season games. Conference tournaments and the national championship continue into the middle of June when the eight surviving teams arrive in Omaha, NE for the College World Series. Depending on the success of their teams in the tournaments, players might get a week at home before reporting to their summer teams. The Northwoods League schedules 72 regular season games and the Coastal Plain League schedules 56, but the norm in summer collegiate baseball is about 44. The Ripken League plays 40 regular season games with the possibility of six or more playoff games. And then, within weeks, the players report back to college and begin fall practice. Granted, this is not quite the grind of a 140 game minor league schedule, but it's a grind.

In the early years, the Big Train played more exhibition games than we do now. We would begin around Memorial Day with games against teams from the Shenandoah Valley. In 1999, we traveled to Altoona, PA before the start of the Griffith League and swept the L.S. Fiore Memorial Day Tournament to pick up our first championship. We also hosted our own tournament — "Ledo Pizza July 4 Hardball Classic" — from 1999 to 2001. The purpose of the holiday classic was to give our fans an opportunity to see teams from other leagues and build relationships with other collegiate summer programs. We hosted two teams — Maryland Bombers and Youse's Orioles — that later joined us in the Ripken League as well as ABCO Phillies from Pennsylvania, Brooklyn Cadets, Churchland Thoroughbreds of Portsmouth, L.S. Fiore of Altoona, Mount Airy Sharks, Swann Insurance of Cambridge, and Youth Service of Brooklyn. We won the championship in 1999 and finished second in 2000 and 2001. In addition, for several seasons we played mid-season exhibition games with Youse's Orioles. In our six years in the Griffith League, we traveled to post-conference tournaments three times adding another week to the schedule. After three years with a robust schedule of non-conference games, we recognized that the long grind of the league schedule was punishing enough on our players and decided to drop our tournament and reduce the number of preseason exhibition games. The Ripken League ends with our league championship. The winner does not then go to a post-conference tournament.

The teams in the Northwoods League and the Coastal Plain League are for-profit organizations. The more games they play, the more money the teams can earn. The Ripken League, as with most summer collegiate leagues, is set up as a not-for-profit organization. Our highest goal is to give our players an excellent experience with wooden bat baseball with a chance to sharpen their skills. We believe the forty game regular season is adequate, reduces the