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Following dad's lead

Saggese Jr. gets pleasure from youths' improvement

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Rick Saggese Jr. had every reason to turn his back on baseball. Most people faced with this type of tragedy would have.

Saggese was a 16-year-old Barron Collier High School sophomore outfielder when his father Rick Sr., a Cougars volunteer assistant, was hit and killed by a baseball during batting practice at the school.

"I had a choice to make. I was either going to sit there and do nothing or I was going to step up and do what he would want me to do," said Saggese, 32. "There's no question in my mind this is what he would want me to do."

Since his three-year playing career with the University of Miami baseball team ended, Saggese has been running a baseball mentoring company, Think Outside the Diamond, in Naples. The company has taken off recently with its new Web site - ricksaggese.com.

Thanks to the Web site, young baseball and softball players from as far away as St. Louis are coming to Naples to train with Saggese. He said he works with about 15-20 youths a week.

"What I do now is pretty much an extension of what my Dad did with me. It's baseball the Saggese Way," he said.

The elder Saggese, who was 44 at the time of his death, taught his son the game when the family lived in Andover, Md.

The lessons proved significant in August 1988 when Saggese hit a game-winning grand slam to lift his team into the Little League World Series.

The family moved to Naples when Saggese was 14 so he could play baseball all year. Two years later, tragedy struck.

Saggese said there isn't a day when he doesn't think about his father.

"I feel him every time I'm with kids. I get his strength," said Saggese, who is also a Cleveland Indians scout. "His light shines through me to help these kids."

Saggese said he has had a lot of parents tell him that their son or daughter is performing better not only in baseball but in school.

"I don't take all the credit for that," Saggese said. "I feel like he's (his dad's) above helping kids perform."

Gateway Charter High School sophomore catcher/first baseman Travis Ruston has been working with Saggese for almost a year.

"He's helped my hitting, strength and speed," Ruston said. "Without him, I would not be starting on my high school baseball team."

Saggese hit .302 with 21 homers and 101 RBI in three years with the Hurricanes. His career was cut short by knee surgeries. He had three in four years - two in high school and one in college.

Saggese said he trains Baltimore Orioles designated hitter Aubrey Huff, who lives in Tampa in the offseason. Huff was Saggese's backup at the University of Miami.

"It's hard to describe what (Saggese) has done in baseball. He's done so much," Ruston said.

Saggese wants to do more. He said he hopes to get a facility in Southwest Florida where baseball and softball players can train. He is looking for an investor to help with securing a facility.

"That's what my dad would want me to do," Saggese said.
