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Section B

Hoping for a home run

New business caters to kids with baseball dreams.

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MEDFORD — The Philadelphia Phillies didn't win the World Series.

But Pat Douglas and his two partners remain passionate about baseball. And they're hoping their new business will hit a

home run with kids.

"What really convinced me to roll the dice — we all put up our houses for collateral — you need to find something you're passionate about," said Douglas, an Evesham resident.

He and partners Steve Naylor of Woodbury and Stephanie Passaro of Evesham started Big League Dreams last spring to bring some fun to local children in a safe environment.

The trio opened a Wiffle Ball center at the former Medford Ice

Rink on Fostertown Road in May.

Inside the 40,000-square-foot building are three Wiffle Ball fields built to the likeness of Citizens Bank Park in Philadelphia, Fenway Park in Boston and Yankee Stadium in New York.

As Douglas explained, it enables kids to play Wiffle Ball in an indoor environment and pretend they're in the big leagues.

The fields, with artificial turf, are smaller, of course, and for
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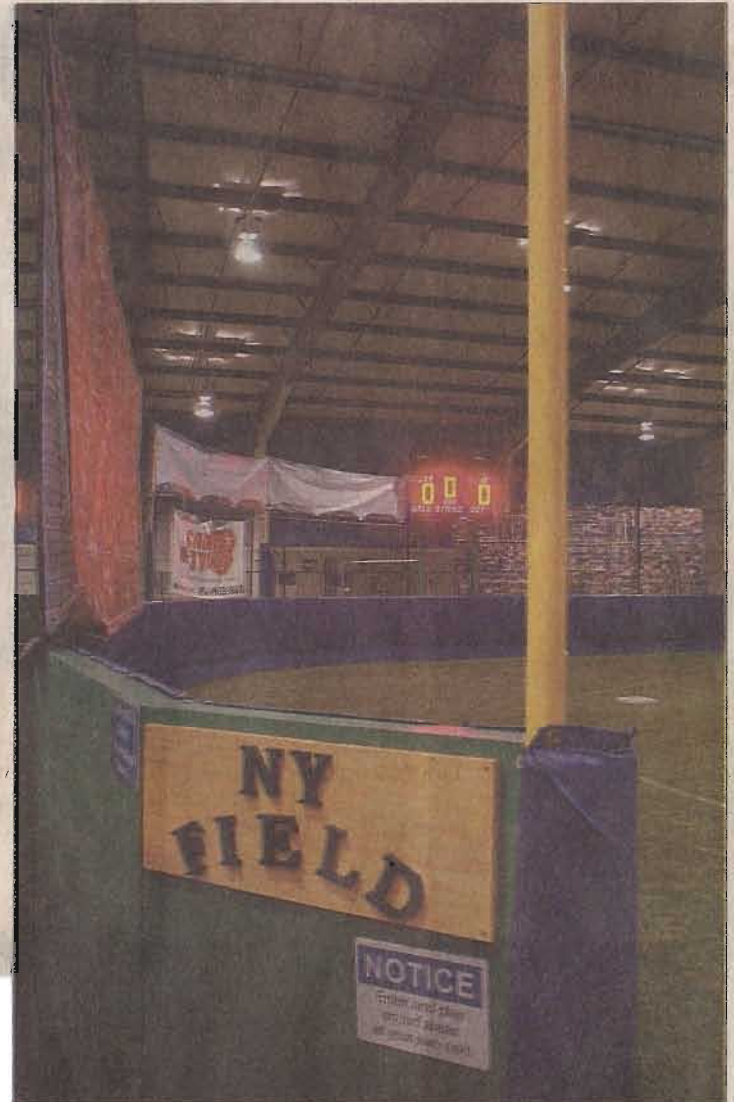
PETE PICKNALLY / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ian Sachs, age 8 of Cherry Hill, bats on Boston Field inside Big League Dreams, on Fostertown Road in Medford. The former ice skating rink has three Wiffle Ball fields: Philly Field, Boston Field and NY Field.



Steve Naylor, of Woodbury, is one of the partners of Big League Dreams, on Fostertown Road in Medford. The former ice skating rink has three Wiffle Ball fields inside made to look like the real big league stadiums. At right is New York field.

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Baseball

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copyright reasons the names are generic. They are called New York Field, Philly Field and Boston Field.

Douglas, a former college baseball player, came up with the idea a few years ago when his oldest son, Shane, now 13, told him he wanted to play Wiffle Ball at a birthday party. The problem was that there was no indoor facility in the area that offered it.

"Shane wanted a place for his own birthday party, and we couldn't find a party place," Douglas said.

Douglas, a youth baseball coach, loves sports and coaching kids, so he combined the two.

The first thing he and his partners had to do was find a site.

Douglas, 47, and Naylor, 31, who worked together at Siemens, said they spent a lot of time two years ago looking at a variety of locales in South Jersey before they came upon the ice rink, which was being sold by Samuel N. Barresi, a Long Branch resident who owned it since the mid-1980s.

Barresi had put the rink up for sale a few years ago but apparently found no bidders.

He closed it in January 2005 after his tenant, Mid-Atlantic Rink Associates, failed to pay its liability insurance premium. Mid-Atlantic was evicted and Barresi closed the building to the public.

Douglas, a former director of operations at Siemens in Vineland, said he and his partners signed a long-term lease with Barresi last year. Terms of the contract were not disclosed.

Naylor, who met Douglas at Siemens, still works for the engineering and technology company, which has branches worldwide.

Douglas and Passaro, 38, met through their children, who were involved in local sports. Passaro, who was not present for a recent interview at Big League Dreams, brings small-business and administrative skills to the partnership, Douglas said.

Douglas, a 1980 graduate of Willingboro High School, said the ice rink building was "junked" when he and his partners took over in fall 2008.

"It took three months to get the building back together," he said, adding that the trio spent about \$500,000 on renovations to convert the ice rink into Big League Dreams.

The center, which has batting cages, an arcade, snack stand and "locker rooms" for the teams, is geared for birthday parties, Douglas said. The site also offers adult and youth leagues, baseball training sessions, summer camp, team building and corporate events.

But the focus, he said, remains children's birthday parties on the weekends.

Naylor pointed out that the home party has lost its allure because of the changing family, the hassle of cleaning up and busy schedules.

"You have to think of everything with a home party," he said. "We try to make it enjoyable for parents as well."

He said coordinators watch the kids as they play to make sure the games are under control.

"We expect the winter to be a really busy time," Douglas said.