

Starting off strong

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As a three-person team of co-owners and co-operators, they seem to make running a baseball and softball academy as easy as a pitcher's 1-2-3 inning.

Enthusiasm for their sports and a cooperative family dynamic have Mike and Kari Ritthaler and Bill Fryar thinking all about growing their new venture, Triple Crown Baseball & Softball Training Center in Valparaiso.

Fresh out of high school, Mike Ritthaler pitched for Valparaiso University baseball from 1992-96. Years before Kari Ritthaler would take her husband's name in marriage, she threw for Goshen College. She attributes her continued excitement for softball to that supportive college environment.

Fryar brings nearly two decades of softball coaching experience to the table. He joined the South Central High School staff as an assistant coach in the mid-90s when the program first got off the ground -- and when his daughter Kari began playing for the team. From 1999 to 2008 he was head coach.

"I've been an instructor for nine years and the (recognition) helps," Kari said. "And with dad's name, it really helps to have people know that you're not just somebody coming off the street saying, 'Hey let's just start this business.'"

If there's any typical way a family runs a business, it's safe to say that the Ritthaler-Fryar team does it a little differently. They currently cater to boys and girls who reserve training by appointment; each family member appears at the 5,000 square-foot facility as needed to tutor youth or check the thermostat. Yet, on a moment's notice they are together in their small business office for a strategy pow wow.

Mike is the chief financial officer and utilizes his business degree and consulting experience to steer the Triple Crown ship through economic uncertainty. Kari works the phone and has been turning connections into clients. Bill is always able to lend a hand to his daughter and son-in-law. The dynamic appears casual and comfortable.

"Here, I'm not in charge of everything," said Fryar, comparing his current work to his coaching days. "We work one-on-one with the players, but we don't have to mother-hen them."

The family operators purchased Triple Crown in August, when former owners, Rich Bafia and Mark Smith, signed the sales papers for the business they had started years earlier to focus on bringing high-level baseball instruction to the youth of Porter County. Bafia continues to operate the Triple Crown facility in Schererville.

Since the business changed hands, the Ritthalers have inked instructional deals with traveling softball teams -- the types of clients they believe will be their mainstay for growth. They accommodate far more softball players in their batting cages and pitching alleys at this point of the year.

"When it evens out more, it's probably 60/40, softball," Mike said.

It's good news for the Ritthalers to see their new clients make their entrance. Comparably quiet for a large group of nine- and 10-year-old girls, coach Bill Anderson's Liberty Legacy 10U travel team is in the house.

Anderson said he's already seen the girls improve by taking 200 to 300 swings at each of two practices during a recent week.

"Starting out, you have to have the patience of Job," he said. "You start with the basics ... and it's truly amazing watching these little girls play."