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Good Sports

Junior pool players learn all the angles and good attitudes

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DATE: [OCT 01, 2018](#)



Junior pool league member Nyla Baker lines up a shot.

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Most pool players probably don't compare themselves to karate masters, but 17-year-old Nyla Baker isn't most pool players.

"They (pool and karate) have a lot of similarities," Baker says. "There's strategy in when to attack and when to defend."

The recent Loy Norrix graduate holds a black belt in karate and trains in other martial arts. Since 2014, she has also been on the junior league of the Kalamazoo Amateur Poolplayers Association, the local branch of a national organization for competitive 8-ball and 9-ball.

Baker is a good example of the skill development and sportsmanship that young people can experience on this junior pool league. She meets every other Saturday with other junior league players at facilities in Portage or Comstock for some friendly competition and a chance to practice her skills.

The junior league, at least at first, was made up of kids who had to tag along when their mothers and fathers were playing pool in the Kalamazoo adult APA, says Tim Baker, an APA member. There were about a half-dozen junior players originally, and over the past three years it's grown to 20 or more young players on any Saturday morning. About half of them have parents in the Kalamazoo league.

Many bars offer a pool table or two for play, but Lins Long Lake Tavern, at 8496 S. Sprinkle Road, has six. That's where APA junior and adult players gather. They've also met at Comstock Cue Club, but that venue was closed for repairs through the winter. Venues donate time on the tables, and players meet at 11 a.m., before business at the bars gets started. It costs \$20 to participate for six months in the junior league.

Derek Fontanilla of Portage has three sons in the junior league — 11-year-old twins Isaac and Elijah and 10-year-old Joseph. All three are in their second season in the league. They started playing because they were already at Kalamazoo APA games: Derek and his wife, Katherine, have been on two adult teams for the past three years. The parents are martial artists, too; Derek heard about the APA in Kalamazoo from Tim Baker, while they were at judo class together.

The Fontanilla family also has a pool table at home. Derek says that it gives the boys plenty of chances to practice.

"They've played people who are 18 (years old)," he says. "They can go up against anybody and not feel intimidated."

Seven to 17

The junior league has players between the ages of 7 (the APA minimum) and 17. They play mostly 9-ball, which takes less skill, and the shorter players use a shorter stick (pool cue), says Mike Keeler, the Kalamazoo APA league operator. In 9-ball, there are only nine balls on the table, and players keep their turn by sinking balls in numerical order. The object of the game is to sink the 9 ball. If you've already sunk the 1 and 2 balls and then use the 3 ball to sink the 9, you win the game. This allow for quick matches — if lucky, a player can end the game before the opponent can even take a turn — and that gives young players an opportunity to play two to three games each time they get together.

Skill levels are rated on a 1 to 9 scale, with 9 as the highest ranking. The APA uses its own system for determining each player's ability, and most junior players have a skill level of 1, 2 or 3, says Keeler. Each year a national championship for the APA juniors is held in Davenport, Iowa. Nyla Baker was one of five junior players from Kalamazoo who competed there in 2016 and 2017, and she won four of her 16 games in 2017. Overall, the Kalamazoo junior players made a good showing that year: Nyla came in among the top third of players at skill levels 4 and 5, while Mikey Barber, Abigail Richards, Riley Schippers and Emmitt Whalen were all ranked skill level 1 or 2. Baker says that although she didn't win any trophies, the variety of opponents she played against helped improve her game.

"During league night, you only get to play one person," she says. "In a tournament, it's a lot of people. I'm interested in playing as many tournaments as I can. You meet a lot of cool kids."

No 'sore winners'

More important to Keeler than winning is seeing young players learn the value of sportsmanship.

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"It's about getting them out of the house and meeting people," he says. "We talk about being not being a 'sore winner.' There's actually less conflict than between adult players."

Tim Baker, who helped organize the APA junior league in Kalamazoo, says that building the next generation of players has always been one of his goals.

"Every game starts and ends with a handshake and wishing each other 'Good game,'" Baker says. "We teach them sportsmanship and how to strive for self-improvement, skills they can use off the table."

Fontanilla notes that, at practices in Kalamazoo, parents of junior league players give advice not only to their own kids, but to the opponents also. He believes there's more of a sense of cooperation and encouragement than in youth sports like ice hockey and baseball.

"Now baseball is all, 'Make your kid the next Derek Jeter,'" he says. "In pool, as long as they practice, they have an opportunity to do well."

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