

Player Profile: Frank Bons, San Diego North MSBL



Shortstop Frank Bons has “good hands.” Hands that helped turn four double-plays to help his SoCal Stars team win the 45+ Wood Bat National Division ring at the 2007 MSBL World Series and then another ring in 2009 with Team Victory. Hands that throw BP to his high school players at Calvin Christian High School in Escondido, where he is head varsity baseball coach. Scratched-up, callused hands that get down and dirty at his 8-acre vineyard in San Marcos, California, where he grows and bottles his own wine. Hands that help other wanna-be farmers in San Diego County start, maintain and manage their own vineyards.

Now a fit 46-year-old, Bons has been playing baseball in the San Diego North MSBL since its inception, and has been to every MSBL World Series since 2003. He’s also played with his sons in the Father-Son Division on occasion. “I’ve been playing men’s senior league before it was a senior league here in San Diego,” Bons told me. “I graduated from college in ’85 and I started playing in ’87.”

In 1989, Bons played in a small local league run by Chuck Saathoff. That league eventually merged with the San Diego North MSBL, founded by Dan Piro and now run by Doug

Johnson. These days, Bons plays with John Zidarevich’s 35+ San Diego Sharks during the regular season. He played in this year’s 2010 World Series with Darren Fleming’s So Cal Blue Jays. (The Jays made it to the semifinals only to lose a 4-3 heartbreaker to Tri-Valley in the ninth inning.) He’s been to MSBL tournaments in Vegas and Palm Springs and hopes to attend the Fall Classic in Florida some day, if his schedule permits it.

Fortunately, Bons’ wine-growing and vineyard management cycle ebbs right about when the MSBL World Series begins, allowing him to make that trip to Arizona every year. “I typically finish my harvest the second to third week of October,” he said. “So when I go to the World Series, I’m really focused, my harvest is finished—I have a few fermentations still going but my partner covers me, or my kids do—so it’s a great way to finish up.”

When he returns from his short baseball break, it’s back to work. Winemaking at his Sunfresh Vineyard winery in San Marcos is just one small facet of what Bons does. The bulk of his business is installing and managing his clients’ vineyards throughout the County. Water costs are rising, so some of his recent clients are farmers switching to grapes from more thirsty crops like avocados. Others are newbies with discretionary income to invest.

Story and photos by Jackie Piro

Frank himself initially grew roses after graduating from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo with a degree in Plant Science. (His parents were farmers who immigrated from the Netherlands in the late 1950's and ended up in southern California in the flower industry.)

But flowers, and roses in particular, are very perishable and labor intensive. "Every three days I had to move that flower; it was a lot of work," Bons recalled. In comparison to roses, he says, growing grapes is "a piece of cake."

"I used to have to work seven days a week in the roses. And for me playing baseball it was a little harder, I had to really pick and choose my games. Now that I'm in the vineyards, I play every week. I coach high school baseball. And so I'm able to do that in the springtime, and then I've been to Arizona every year since I got out of the rose business."

Bons and his family live adjacent to their vineyard, and harvesting the grapes is a family affair. Bons and his wife Sylvia celebrated their 25th anniversary this year. "She has been wonderful over the years in support of my love of baseball, and has been the love of my life," said Bons. "Without her, I wouldn't be where I am today." Frank and Sylvia have four children, daughter Melissa (22) and sons Anthony (21), Jake (17) and Ryan (14).

Staying in Shape

Since Frank plays ball year-round and throws a lot of BP with his high school team, he doesn't need to practice or work out. His vineyard work involves lots of physical, outdoor labor, and then there's his other love, surfing, to keep him in shape. He has no exercise routine other than stretching every day, which he has done since his high school days. "If you want to keep playing at age 46, stretch every day," he advises.

Passion for the Game

When I asked Frank to name his favorite major league team or player, he declined. "I'm a fan of the game, I have a passion for the game," he said. "I've never had a favorite team, other than when I was on the bandwagon with the Big Red Machine back in the seventies," he said.

Frank, who grew up in Encinitas, California, started playing baseball when he was 8 years old, in the San Marcos Youth Baseball program. He hasn't quit since. He played high school ball with Santa Fe Christian. He did not play college ball or pro ball, preferring to focus on his education, and he is now glad he didn't. "That's probably why I'm still playing at the level I am today, because my body hasn't given out," he said. Still, he found ways to play, with a college summer league and a semi-pro rehab league, before finding the MSBL.

"I'm glad I didn't play pro, because I think I love the game more," he said. "Let me tell you a story: Steve Finley was one of my clients. I made wine for him in Rancho Santa Fe. And we were harvesting his fruit, and he had to go to Anaheim when he was playing for the Angels, and we sat around and we talked wine and baseball for about an hour.

"And Amy, his wife, asked me, 'Did you

ever get paid to play pro?'"

"I said, 'No, I've never been paid to play the game, but I love it too much.' She looked at Steve and said, 'I wish you had that back again.' Because for him it was a business, and he got paid to play the game.

"He was an incredible athlete and one of the nicest guys I've ever met that played the game. Took the game very seriously. He kept himself in shape year-round.

"And I think about him and I think that had I gone pro, I might not have loved the game like I do today."

Bons has a strong preference for wood bats, even for his high school players. "When I coach high school baseball, we do not touch an aluminum bat until the first game of the season," he said. "In the cage we're wood only." He once took his entire high school team up to Los Angeles to buy wood bats from Trinity Bat Company.

He loves the mental aspect of baseball. "The more you get into it and the more you learn about the game, the more difficult it becomes," he said. "Because every pitch is different. And I have to adjust my ball reading, my in-and-out, my side-to-side, on every pitch.

"If my pitcher is hitting his spots, it's an easy job. Bill Rindone is one of those—he'll hit his spots. But if the pitcher's not hitting his spots, it's a guessing game for me. Then I have to start reading the bat, and that's a little harder. If I can read the pitch, it becomes a very easy game. We can tell what he's throwing because we read the catcher's signs, we know what's coming, we're talking amongst third base, second baseman what the next pitch is, and so we know what's coming.

"It's really an amazing game. Who would've thought that when it all started, that little bat and that ball....would have evolved into the game it is today. It's quite incredible."

"Nicest Guy On the Planet"

When you ask Frank's teammates what they think of him, you get the same reaction. He is universally well-liked and respected.

"He's just a great guy," said Doug Johnson, San Diego North County MSBL President. "Not only does Frank let our league use his high school field—he also opens up the field for us in the morning, checks the field in-between games to make sure it's in good shape for the next game, and closes it at night for us. With all that he has going on his life, with his work, his kids' sports activities, playing ball on weekends, coaching his high school team, for him to take the time—what more can you ask? We really appreciate him."

"He's got to be the nicest guy on the planet," echoes second baseman/catcher Buzzy Sailer. "The thing that I like the most about Frank is that he gives 150 percent every play. He goes after balls that he knows he can't get; he gives up his body just to show the pitcher that he's willing to do it. It helps pitchers out like you wouldn't believe. I've seen him dive for balls that I'm closer to than he is, and I'll say 'Frank, what are you doing?' And he says 'I want that pitcher to know that I'm willing to give up my body for him.'"

Pitcher Bill Rindone agrees. "He just gives his body up; he doesn't care. He only goes one speed, that's 100 miles an hour. He will lay out for every ball. You will never have to guess whether Frank gave it his all, because you will know. As a pitcher, I know I can hit my location and no matter how hard it's hit, if he's playing behind me, I know he's coming up with it. He gives me unbelievable confidence."

Sailer recalled playing second with Bons playing third. "Frank and I, when I play at second, we never even have to talk," said Sailer. "There's been a couple of times where I've had a ground ball going to my right at the middle, where I know that I can't stop and throw the guy out, and I just catch the ball and throw it up in the air, knowing Frank's gonna come by and grab it. The first time we did that in Phoenix, our first baseman said 'How did you get rid of that ball so quick?' and I said 'I didn't throw it; Frank did!' He had no idea. It's one of those things where I know what he's doing and he knows what I'm doing at all times."

What else does Sailer like about playing with Bons? "Well," said Sailer, "I know that after the game, we're going to have a great glass of wine." □

WHERE TO BUY



Bons sells some of his Sunfresh Vineyards wine wholesale, mostly to small mom-and-pop retailers in San Diego County. He also bottles some under his Twin Oaks Valley Winery label. These estate-bottled wines are available for sale on the internet at AmericanWinery.com, and can also be found locally at T&H Meats in San Marcos, Holiday Wine Cellar in Escondido, and at the San Diego Wine and Culinary Center.

Types of wine available: Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Zinfandel, Viognier, and blends (Syrenade and "Sunset Red," which is 60% Syrah and 40% Cabernet Sauvignon).

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