



Wise old Owl: At 41, Asar still lives and breathes baseball

By Dave Dyer, Staff Writer

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— Like a good Timex, Haverhill's Kamal Asar of the Kingston Night Owls just keeps ticking and ticking, with no visible signs of aging.

Asar, at 41 the only regular starter in the league over 40, is the Grand Old Man of the semi-pro North Shore Baseball League (NSBL), except for one thing. He is not | by a long shot | acting his age.

With the season a little more than half over, Asar is hitting a robust .433, leading the Night Owls in runs scored (14) and stolen bases and patrolling center field like Coco Crisp. A prototype leadoff batter, he also gets his share of walks, which boosts his on-base percentage to a team-leading .585. He's only struck out once all year.

Despite his age, Asar is the fastest player on his team.

"I still hear it when I come up, things like 'Watch for the bunt' or 'He's got wheels,' " said Asar, a former standout at North Andover High School and Roger Williams College. "But I don't bunt much. I'm a line-drive hitter."

A veteran of 23 years in the former Northeast League and now the NSBL, Asar is, when he should be slowing down, having his best year. He did enjoy several years batting in the .400s for both the North Andover Cardinals, for whom he played for 12 years, and the Night Owls, but most of them were in the aluminum-bat era.

How does he explain the renaissance?

"I really don't understand it," said Asar, a photographer who owns his own business, Action Images. "I'm getting a lot of good pitches to hit and I think I'm a lot smarter hitter than I used to be. I work the count, I study tendencies and I think I know the game so much better as I get older. There are a lot of nuances in the game that I didn't pick up before."

Moreover, Asar adjusted quickly when the league switched back, five years ago, from aluminum to wooden bats.

"That changed the game entirely," said Asar. "One year (with aluminum bats) I had six home runs and I never hit them anymore. There were guys who hit home runs but couldn't do much else, and they're no longer in the league.

"I had to adjust my whole game, but I think wooden bats are actually more suited to my game. I try to make good contact and get the ball in play.

"I would never use aluminum bats again. I think you take a lot of the skill away with aluminum bats. There's not as much to the game."

Asar is the second oldest player in the league (part-time player Bob Dedrick of Swampscott is 45) and certainly the most experienced. In addition to all the years in the Northeast League/NSBL, he often plays concurrently in other leagues.

For several years, Asar also played in the Boston Park League, the Boston over-30 league and the Granite State over-30 League as well as joining tournament teams that would tour the country. For a few years, he played as many as 100 games in a season.

"I don't think the younger guys and rookies on the team really think of him as being old," said Night Owls player-coach Dan Sweet, no youngster himself at 37. "They probably have no idea how old he really is or how much baseball he has played. I think they see him as our center fielder and a solid player. He outperforms most of them | I think he takes a lot of pride in that."

Reflecting on his prolific baseball resume, Asar said: "I played on three teams for several years and I've been on four teams. This year I'm only on one other, the Somerville Senators (in the over-30 Boston League). They start their season earlier, so it helps me get ready for the Night Owls, and the season ends later so I can get

more games in.

"But I don't like the over-30 leagues as much. The competition isn't as good so, if I have a choice, I stick with the NSBL."

The 5-foot-7, 135-pound Asar attributes his longevity to good conditioning and good health. Except for rotator cuff surgery in 1997, which all but ended his role as a part-time pitcher, he has suffered few injuries, and he works out in the gym religiously year-round.

"And I think staying light, at the same weight, helps a lot," said Asar. "There's less wear and tear on the body."

How long does he expect to keep playing?

"I love playing, so I'll keep playing as long as the body holds up," said Asar. "Every year now is a bonus. I never expected to be playing past 30."

Asar's career highlights

| Roger Williams College MVP in 1989

| Captured four straight league championships (1987-90) with North Andover Cardinals

| Voted Northeast League All-Star as first baseman, center fielder and pitcher

| Had game-winning hit for Larkin Club in 1997 championship series in the Boston Park League

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Photos



Kamal Asar of Kingston Night Owls warms up for Sunday's game against the Andover Shockers. Staff Photo