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Get on board the Express

June 1, 2005
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 Staff Writer

With just two weeks remaining before opening night of the Cal Ripken, Sr. League season, John Pflieger's list of "things to do" was still a little longer than he might have liked. But the list of "things done" was much longer than that.

Pflieger is the president of the brand-new Rockville Express, a summer wood-bat team for college baseball players. The Express officially opened for business last fall; since then, Pflieger, manager Tom Shaffer and general manager Jim Adams, along with a team of interns, have been working to get the team ready for the team's inaugural game, June 11 in Rockville against the Maryland Bombers.

"We're in a unique situation in that everything is brand new," Pflieger said. "The other teams in the league were pre-existing, and we were starting late on top of it. ... Quite honestly, we're a little behind where we hoped to be simply because of the sheer number of things that are going on."

Before the Express could even think about selling tickets to a baseball game, several things had to happen. For one, the team needed a field to play the game on.

That part was easy. Tom Shaffer, the manager at Montgomery College-Rockville, had put four years' worth of work not only into the Knights, but also into their ballpark. Last summer, he also managed the Germantown Black Rox, a wood-bat team that played some of its home games at Knights Field. Shaffer signed on to manage the Express, and the college agreed to lend the team the use of its field.

Simply having a field to play on wasn't quite enough, though. The Cal Ripken, Sr. league was founded on several principles, one being the importance of first-class facilities. One of Shaffer's main priorities this spring has been to take his home field from good to top-notch.

"Since we've gotten there, there's a new backstop, two brand new dugouts, and we've improved the quality of the infield surface," Shaffer said. "Right now, we're in the process of putting in our grandstand. ... We built a press box a year ago, but the college wasn't sure what they wanted to do with it. We finally have the money to get it done. There are a lot of other things we'd like to do and I believe we can do."

Still on the horizon at the ballpark are lights -- the Express will start its games this season early enough to finish by dark -- and improved fencing in the outfield. But both will have to wait until next season.

For now, it's enough that players have a well-groomed field and fans have a nice seat. The Express caught two breaks on the bleachers. Richard Montgomery High School, which is dismantling its football stadium as part of a reconstruction, was going to donate its bleachers. But the contractor who was going to move them had a newer set that fit the Express' needs better, and swapped the Richard Montgomery bleachers to another project. The grandstand

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went in late last week.

The field preparations settled, the Express needed players to take that field. In general, summer-league teams have their roster options worked out by October, about the time when the Express were coming into existence. Again, one of the tenets of the league -- cooperation between teams -- came into play.

"Two people we really owe a lot to are Bruce Adams of the Big Train and Dick O'Connor of the Thunderbolts [two other Ripken League teams from the county]," Pflieger said. "At one of the initial organizational meetings, they said, 'We get lots of player referrals, our team is set, why don't we share these referrals with you?'"

Having a field to host games, and players to play on the field, the Express came to the next step -- finding families to host players. One of the biggest jobs of any summer-league team is to find homes, and jobs, for players who need them.

That's currently the main focus of assistant general manager Jonathan Rogers. Rogers, a Richard Montgomery graduate and currently a sports management major at the University of Michigan, will spend his summer interning for the Express.

"The main thing right now is finding housing," Rogers said. "There's a board we work with, and everyone is doing a little of that searching for people to take players into their homes ... and looking for jobs for players who want them."

There have been plenty of other things going on for the Express. Shaffer is also spearheading the equipment gathering, and had a large role in contacting players.

Everyone in the organization is spending as much time as possible getting the word out. The Express had a booth at the Hometown Holidays festival in Rockville over the Memorial Day weekend, and will plan more promotions once the season gets underway.

Some of the finer points -- the team's Web site, concessions contracts, sponsorships -- may have to wait a little while. The main thing is, the Express will be ready to play ball come June 11.

New Rockville wood-bat team nearing starting line



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