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Tuesday, July 3, 2007

U.S. Military All-Stars: Barnstorming the country they defend

Three-game series with county's Ripken League teams combines competitive spirit with a lot of respect

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer

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Only three letters are needed to describe why last week was one of the most special in the history of the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League.

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Last Tuesday through Thursday, the United States Military All-Stars squared off against the Bethesda Big Train, Rockville Express, and Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts for an historic exhibition series. The games were a first in the three-year existence of the Ripken League.

And while the results didn't count towards the standings, there was a certain competitive spirit in the air. While simply being on the same field as the Military All-Stars was an honor for the players and coaching staffs of the three Montgomery County teams, they needed no motivation to play their hearts out, whether or not the games counted in the standings.

Nobody ever half-steps against America.

"We just enjoyed being on the field with them — we knew they'd compete hard against us, and what they appreciated about us is we did the same," said Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts manager John Duffy. "They said that one of the things they enjoyed is that they almost never see one pitcher for more than one inning in the games they play. One of their hitters even told me he liked that we were playing 'real' baseball."

The All-Stars, comprised of players aged 24-35 and from all four branches of the military, went 1-1-1 for the series. Tuesday night, they lost 8-3 to the Big Train, but engaged in a 7-7 tie with the Express on Wednesday and beat the Thunderbolts 4-1 in a rain-shortened, seven-inning battle to close the series.



Charles E. Shoemaker/The Gazette
Catcher Caleb Robbins sports camouflage gear over his camouflage uniform last Thursday against the Thunderbolts.

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Tuesday night was a look into the past for Bethesda. Starting on the mound for the All-Stars was Jahsan Page, who played for the Big Train in the Clark C. Griffith Collegiate Baseball League in 2001 and 2002. Page had his former team baffled early, retiring eight straight batters at one point, before the Big Train finally broke through with a three-run sixth.

But what was even more noteworthy was what followed the game. Page. A 24-year-old serving in the United States Air Force, was deployed back to Japan the next day. As Big Train manager Sal Colangelo said, it put the magnitude of the game and everything else in perspective.

“I got to talk to him for about an hour before the game just to see how everything’s going, and he said he checks our Web site once or twice a day,” he said. “It’s why this is by far one of the most memorable games I’ve ever been a part of. These are true soldiers with a mission just to pass the American way. The game is everything to us but I mean, they have to protect our country.

“And they’re competitive. They’d be at the top of our league, without a doubt. What was awesome is they play only 60 or so days a year, and for what type of shape they’re in and the hand-eye coordination they have, you just can’t teach that.”

Though they only compete from April through September (most of their opponents play year-round), it’s no coincidence that the Military All-Stars field such a competitive team. More than 5,000 men vied for roster spots this year, with designated “spotters” (scouts) from 30 military bases around the world sending the talent to winter tryouts. Because so many tried out, winter workouts were held at 11 different locations around the world, mostly on American soil but extending as far as Okinawa, Japan.

Those who make the team are granted special-assignment status for six months, in which they play various collegiate and semi-professional teams. Earlier this summer, they faced an all-star squad from the Cape Cod Baseball League, which is generally considered the top collegiate summer league in the country.

But the games themselves are only part of the task for the Military All-Stars, whose primary responsibility involves community interaction at every destination. In fact, over the course of the season, they make over 350 public appearances.

“What we try to do is raise awareness,” said head coach Bill Sandillo. “We usually don’t play one game and leave, there’s always a criteria — we go to nursing homes, schools, things to let the kids know it’s really like. Then on the players’ side, other guys are always saying how amazing it is that when our guys finish their games, they’re grabbing guns, and they’re going back to video games. It humbles them.”

Sandillo, a civilian with 15 years of professional baseball experience, has a deep military connection that brought him to the dugout. His father, Albert, was an original Navy All-Star player in the 1940s and ’50s, where he played against athletes such as former New York Yankee great Joe DiMaggio. He also fought in World War II with the Navy and the Korean War with the Air Force.

Bill Sandillo is Founder and CEO of Predator Performance Sports Management, a multi-faceted company that offers management services, marketing, personal training and instructing for athletes of all age groups. Clients include Hall-of-Fame outfielder Frank Robinson and current Minnesota Twins centerfielder Torii Hunter. Sandillo’s business is sponsoring the 2007 tour, with his father (who passed away in 2005) being the primary reason for his involvement.

“It’s all for the love of my dad; I wear the patches on the uniform and everything,” he said. “It’s amazing just meeting these guys are hearing their stories. People treat us like heroes, which personally I’ll remember because I’m just a civilian. Guys really appreciate what they do for our country. They’re playing a game one minute, and they could be out fighting in wars the next.”

Though they command admiration from their opponents for their off-the-field lifestyle, their on-field prowess is the reason that they, specifically, were at three county locations this past week. And as you would expect from the

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military's finest, they gave the Ripken League teams a battle.

“A lot of times, when you play exhibition games, people just go through the motions, but they brought camaraderie and competitiveness to the night,” said Colangelo. “All feelings of respect are there, but we knew when they stepped on the field, they wanted to kick our ass.”

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