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Wednesday, Oct. 31, 2007

Root, root, root for ... wait, a home team?

Unheralded Rockville Express brings city a championship in summer baseball

by Graham Fitts | Special to The Gazette
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With Major League Baseball's 2007 season now one for the history books and the Orioles and Nationals not coming close to the playoffs, baseball fans in Rockville can still take solace in the fact their collegiate summer league team won its championship.

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If they knew anything about it.

The Rockville Express, a member of the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League, completed its third season in August and despite a high level of competition and fun atmosphere, popularity is growing slowly.

"In the beginning [the attendance] was by affiliation," said Brad Botwin of Derwood, vice president of the team, who said attendance ranges from 50 to 100-plus people per game. "This past year we did have more people coming because families wanted to just come out and see a game."

The Cal Ripken Sr. League is a wooden-bat summer league that recruits top college players from all over the country to play in one of eight teams in the Washington metropolitan area.

The league has produced a handful of professional players, the most notable of whom is Joe Smith, who played for the Express in 2005 and had some success pitching for the New York Mets this season until he was sent back to the minor leagues in July.

"If you're a baseball purist, you're going to see great baseball. If you're a girl and you want to see some good looking young men, you can come out," John Pflieger, president of the Express, said chuckling. "If you're a young kid and you want to chase balls – there's something for everybody."

Express games are not only entertaining for spectators, but they are also beneficial for the community, team officers say. The team is a non-profit organization that plays at Knights Field at Montgomery College in Rockville, where the team uses its funds to help improve field conditions.

"One of the projects we have in the pipes right now is to put lights on the field," said Jim Kazunas, the team's general manager. "The community's helping a lot, but the community's also benefiting."

Many within the team think the lights will not only give the team the ability to play at night, but will also help boost attendance. The team usually plays its games during the week at 5 p.m., which makes it difficult for people to attend because of work. Botwin says that with the addition of the lights, he expects attendance to quadruple.

While the lights should help, some feel there is still more to be done.

"The marketing needs to be much better," said Frank Bond, an Express fan who by the end of

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Gazette.Net the summer housed three players at his home. “Other bigger teams like the Bethesda Big Train have big stadiums and they are beginning to do a lot of family things like water balloons and running around the bases and things. Hopefully, that will work out.”



The Big Train is regarded by many in the Express as the largest and most successful organization in the league, averaging more than 700 spectators per game, according to General Manager David Ireland. The Big Train is also the team the Express defeated in the championship.

“It’s hard for [the Express]. They don’t have a lot of dollars, so they don’t have a lot to throw towards ads,” said John Philbin, owner of Philbin’s Training Center in Gaithersburg, who sponsors the Express by providing free gym memberships to players during the season. “To [advertise] cheaply requires a lot of hard work.”

In addition to corporate sponsorships, the Express also receives individual contributions and government grants. The grants provide a great deal of support to the team, but many feel there is more to be done.

“I think there are a good number of people that aren’t aware of the team and I think a good number would come out to see the games if they knew about it,” Rockville City Councilwoman Susan R. Hoffmann, who attended several Express games, said. “I don’t know whether there are other things the city could be doing that could help. I would certainly be willing to sit down with John Pflieger and explore some things.”

One step the team is probably taking in the future is to charge spectators to attend the games. Pflieger says management would charge mainly to cover the cost of the lights going up, but hopes it would begin generating revenue at some point.

“I believe so strongly in our product and what we [will] have here once the lights are in and the fan base is what we want it to be,” Pflieger said. “Having the Express to provide entertainment was our initial initiative, and our second initiative is to provide for the community.”

Even with all the positives associated with the Express and its recent success on the field, Botwin still sees many challenges ahead in financing the team.

“We’ve had to beg, borrow and soon we even may have to steal,” he said.

Coaches and staff

Head coach: Tom Shaffer

Pitching coach: Bill Sizemore

Hitting coach: Mario Porto

Assistant coach: Aaron Stupica and Chris Williams

Manager: Sean Kelly

Trainer: Ashley Williams

President: John Pflieger Jr.

Vice president: Brad Botwin

General manager: James Kazunas

2007 awards and honors

Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League champions

League Most Valuable Player: Eric Allen, centerfield

League Championship Series Most Valuable Player: Beau Brooks, catcher

All-League Team: Steve Domecus, outfielder

Stats

The stats

2005: 19 wins, 20 losses, 1 tie

2006: 25 wins, 15 losses, second place regular season

2007: 27 wins, 15 losses, tied first place regular season, playoff series champions

Season begins early June and ends early August

Home field: Knights Field at Montgomery College, 51 Mannakee St., Rockville

For more

Rockville Express Web site: www.rockvilleexpress.org

Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League Web site: www.ripkenscollegebaseball.org

Telephone: 301-340-1697

Team Mailing Address: P.O. Box 10188 Rockville, MD 20849

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