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Wednesday, July 16, 2008

Out-of-town Ripken League players right at home

by John Y. Wehmuller | Staff Writer
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Tom and Jami Deise almost literally jumped at the chance to host Bethesda Big Train baseball players. Frank and Jeri Bond initially traded their basement to Rockville Express players for a beach condo rental.

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Then there's eight-year-old Jackson Dechter, who shaved the number of his favorite Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolt into the side of his head.

Welcome to one of summer baseball's most celebrated traditions. The three Montgomery County-based Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League teams welcome players from Gaithersburg to California, and the families who host players for the summer are part of the lifeblood of the league.

The Big Train are celebrating their 10th anniversary and for some time, their network of host families has been more reliable than a train schedule. There are over 20 for this year's team, meaning only a handful of players double up.

On Sunday, the team's hosts and players got together for a barbecue, the second installment of what is fast becoming an annual tradition.

"Most are long-time hosters," said Jami Deise, who coordinates the Big Train hosts. "You get the inside scoop of what happens in the game that night; you find out all kinds of stuff. For us, it's definitely the baseball angle. Other families who host aren't really big baseball fans; they might get something completely different out of it."

The Deise family has a 14-year-old son, Alex, about to enter St. John's (D.C.), a renowned baseball high school. They have a pitching mound in their back yard, built last summer by



J. Adam Fenster/The Gazette
 Catcher Randy Mulligan, a California native, is one of two Bethesda Big Train players living this summer with the team's host family coordinator, Jami Deise, and her family.

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Brian Anderson and Keith Moreland, a pair of Big Train pitchers who weren't even staying with them.

Five years ago, Tom and Jami Deise received separate copies of the team's newsletter, including an ad seeking host families. Each decided to suggest to the other that they should do it.

They put up long-time Big Train stalwart Adam Redd "off and on for four years," Jami said, and currently host outfielder Eli Boike from Michigan and catcher Ryan Mulligan from California.

"There's always going to be that, 'How are they going to like me, how am I going to like them?' It's a lot like going to college," Mulligan said. "Jami and Tom, they're awesome. I'm thinking about actually coming back next year and living with them again."

The Thunderbolts are a little different, in that they make a concerted effort to bring in local players. Two-thirds of the pitching staff and 13 of the 29-man roster hail from Maryland, and others have area connections.

Still, eight players needed hosts this summer. Coordinator Gina Lowe trolls for potential families among her neighbors and her son's baseball team.

"Some people immediately just say 'I won't give up my privacy,'" Lowe said. "Certain people can't be bothered; others think it sounds kind of cool. That's how we started: 'This sounds cool, and worst case, it's two months, we hate it and never do it again.'"

The Lowes are now in their fifth season as hosts; Billy Barber of Fredericksburg, Va., is staying with them.

Many hosts around the league are like the Lowes and the Deises, with younger children who are baseball enthusiasts. Most spend a lot of nights at the ballpark, cheering on their summer boarders.

A few go to great lengths, like Jackson Dechter, who shaved a Thunderbolt into one side of his head and the number four into the other, in honor of Brett Connor.

"He said he'd do it if I hit a home run," Connor said. "They've got three kids there to entertain me, and vice versa. ... They challenged me to every video game they had, so I had to kick their butts."

Not all host families have young, hero-worshipping sons, and not all embrace the idea immediately. When the Rockville franchise was born four years ago and badly needed hosts, board member Jim Kazunas started working on business partner Frank Bond.

Bond was reluctant. He had a daughter, Meredith, entering her sophomore year of high school, and wasn't sure college boys in the basement was such a great idea.

"Having other kids you don't know in the house, you don't know how that will work out," Bond said. "Jim, though, said they're all good kids; college teams don't send out their knuckleheads. They became like older brothers to my daughter. We had the best summer."

That was last year, when Bond and his wife, Sharon, finally caved in. What sealed the deal was that the family was having trouble finding a place to stay at the beach, and Kazunas had a connection with a condo available.

"He said, 'Do you think you can host a player this summer?'" Bond said. "I said, 'Will that seal the deal?'"

The Bonds got one player in exchange for the condo, and eventually welcomed two more. This year, they are hosting Adam Bryant and Jordan Mathers of Troy (Ala.) University. Bryant had never stayed with another family before this summer.

"Before I got here, I was a little iffy; you don't know what you're getting yourself into," Bryant said. "They took

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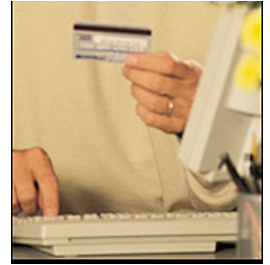
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me in like one of their own. It's been a great time.”

The Bonds, for their part, have embraced the role of host family. Frank cooks dinner for his players, and any others who come over, late at night after games. Sharon does their laundry.

“They're part of the family now,” Frank Bond said, “not just the guys living in the basement.”

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