

Bend Elks Play American Pastime with Heart

by K_Guice

Jacques Martin Barzun may have said it best, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball." Both are embodied in the 2006 Bend Elks.

The collegiate team's season opener is Friday, June 9 and it is baseball at its purest. Everyone on this team is playing for the sheer love of the game, not to collect a paycheck, according to the man behind the team, Jim Richards.

Seven years ago it was his vision that brought baseball back to Bend. "Old semi-pro teams have been here going back to the 1920s and '30s," said Richards, the owner and general manager.

In fact, there have been a number of teams pass through Vince Genna Stadium including Single-A, minor league teams which are owned by major league baseball teams. Richards recalls there was the Bend Phillies owned by the Philadelphia Phillies; the Bend Bucks, owned by the California Angels; and the Bend Rockies, owned by the Colorado Rockies. From 1995 to 1998 there was an independent team, but like the others they didn't last and the stadium sat empty in 1999.

"A few years prior to that I had opened up a small baseball business with indoor batting cages and a small training facility where high school and school-age kids could come in and work on their swing when there was snow on the ground," Richards said. "One thing led to another and we grew."

His business had become the heartbeat of the baseball community. "People would discuss their concerns that there wasn't baseball at the stadium anymore," he said.

It was those heart-felt fan talks that led Richards to calling some of his connections inside the baseball world. "From there, my wife and I decided to purchase a franchise of the Pacific International League (PIL)."

The league had teams in Washington and Canada. They were often made up of a mix of old pros and college players. "We stayed in that league for four years and then six of the 11 teams in that league formed the West Coast Collegiate Baseball League"

Richards said the new league was formed because "there were some eligibility issues for some college students who were playing with ex pros that were receiving some compensation." College players are not allowed to receive payment for play and while no collegiate players were remunerated, Richards said it blurred the lines.

Having young, passionate, talented players who played for pure enjoyment is what Richards wanted, so it only made sense to be part of the new collegiate league.

These college players bring a lot of heart to the game and are extremely talented. Many of Bend Elks have gone on to play for major league team. "We have close to two dozen players, since 2000, that have gone on to pro baseball," Richards stated.

One of the most noteworthy is a local kid from Madras. Jacoby Ellsbury started playing for the Bend Elks right out of Madras High School in 2002. In 2005, the Oregon State outfielder became a MLB first-round pick by the Boston Red Sox.

"Jacoby had tremendous baseball talent and we like to think that we played a small part in his development," Richards said. When Ellsbury graduated he was drafted by the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. He was weighing that option or going to Oregon State.

In the interim, while making the decision, he was playing for the Bend Elks. The Devil Rays and Oregon State scouts came to Bend often that summer.

"During that summer, as he proved he could play this game at a very high level his stock continued to rise," according to Richards. Oregon State finally convinced him and it ultimately led him down the right road. Ellsbury went from a 20th round draft pick out of high school to a No. 1 draft pick for the Red Sox out of college. "That decision meant a multi-million dollar contract," he says.

Who knows what talented players could be at Vince Genna Stadium this year? With Elk players being from all over the country, fans could be watching the next baseball superstars.

That is one thing Richards stresses; these are great players, playing a good ball game. "We are not compromising quality. Many of our players are the same age of the Single-A players who play professional baseball."

Richards adds, the only difference is his collegiate players chose the path of getting their education first while playing at an amateur level. "And our players embrace the fans." The players on this team have a pure passion for this great American pastime.

The team also has a passionate staff. However, it is worth mentioning, unlike the players, the staff is paid for the season. This year, the Bend Elks are being coached by a former player, Nate Pratt.

He graduated from Redmond High School, went on to play baseball at Lane in Eugene and then St. Martins in Olympia. "While he played college baseball, he came back home and played summer baseball with the Bend Elks."

Pratt worked his way through the ranks as an assistant coach in 2003. He then moved up to head coach in 2004 for a second team Richards operates called the Oregon Bucks. In 2005, he returned as an assistant coach, but landed the coaching position the last two weeks after a mid-season coaching change.

"We have extended his contract and brought in Casey Powell as an assistant coach," Richards said. Powell was the head coach in 2004 and then went on to become head coach at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington.

Today, Richards says the game at the professional level has been somewhat tainted with all of the negativity surrounding performance-enhancing drugs, big contracts and player strikes.

That is one reason the organization looked to the past when selecting a name for the team. Richards said they wanted to bring back the game of the past, where ball clubs played for the love of the game.

The Bend Elks was the name of the team back in the 1920s. Back then they were sponsored by the Bend Elk Lodge. However, Richards says today they are not connected to or affiliated with the lodge

The prices are also a toss back to the past. "The cost with these multi-faceted stadiums are such that you're going to blow \$250 for a family of four," Richards says. On family Friday at Vince Genna Stadium attendees get four admissions, four hot dogs and four sodas all for \$25. Single admission is \$4, except on Tuesdays where everyone gets in for \$2.

"We have proven that baseball is still baseball," Richards said. "We went back to yesteryear to try to create baseball as many of us remembered it to be."

It is a philosophy that seems to be working. Each year the audience numbers continue to grow and the team is banking on good weather allowing another record-breaking year.

Richards invites everyone to come see what will happen next. He says this year is going to be exciting. The Elks have beefed up both their offence and defense and says it's going to be a year of great baseball no

one should miss.

Players to Watch: Infield:Eric Sogard - Phoenix, AZ - So at Arizona State Grant Desme - Bakersfield, CA - So at Cal Poly Dan Cox - Chehalis, WA - Fr at Univ. of Washington Outfield:Jake Rife - Arlington, WA- Fr at Univ. of Washington Dan Wentzell - Tualatin, OR - Jr at George Fox Univ. Pitchers:Scott Lonergan - Poway, CA - Jr at Rice Kenin Waldron - Ventura, CA - So at Cal Poly Alex Sogard - Phoenix, AZ - Fr at Oregon State Johnny Hurko - Bend, OR - So at Lane Community College Catchers:Pat Burk - Sisters, OR - Jr at Albertsons College Ryan Pittman - Stillwater, OR - Fr at Oklahoma State Bend Weekly Newslink: www.BendElks.com Photo Credits: Charlie O'Reilly

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