

SPORTS

Diamond dream come true

Writer gets a taste of national pastime

"Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet."

An unknown scholar made this comment about America's favorite national pastime — baseball. As the dog days of summer wind down, so does the baseball season. So let me take a moment to reflect on one of my fondest memories of the past season.

This quote may not have much relevance at the big-league level anymore. The only place it may hold any truth is in the bush leagues — better known as the minor leagues — where one can still go and enjoy baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and even have a shot at winning a car on fan appreciation night.

My journey took me to Charlotte on a humid July night in which the hometown Knights, a Double A affiliate of the Chicago Cubs, were hosting the Huntsville (Ala.) Stars, an Oakland Athletics farm club. In attendance with me was my UNC hallmate, Rodney Cline.

We arrived at the ballpark about 45 minutes early. Our objective was to obtain the autograph of Todd Van Poppel, the Stars' rookie phenom and the A's first-round draft pick.

After battling young kids, adults and other autograph seekers, we finally gained a good spot in the front row beside the Huntsville dugout. After watching Van Poppel exercise for about 25 minutes, we saw him finally make his way over to the dugout. We were the third and fourth persons for whom he gave his John Hancock. Mission accomplished.

We then took in some ballpark hot dogs and soda before settling into our general admission seats on the first-base line at cozy Knights Castle.

The game turned out to be a drag as Huntsville trounced the Knights, 17-3. The Stars lit up the Knight sky as three Huntsville players hit their first home runs of the season. The game got so ugly for the Knights that their second baseman pitched the ninth inning.

However, it was neither the autograph, hot dogs nor the game itself that made this night so special and interesting for me.

On this night — and this night only — Rodney and I were honorary members of the Charlotte Knights' ground crew. During the eighth inning, Rodney and I were approached by two Knights'

David Monroe

Staff Writer

employees who were looking for prospective workers to help the ground crew after the game.

The way in which we were selected for this glamorous job is a neat story within a story. Two of the eight ground crew members failed to show up for this game. As a result, two other crew members, Ken and Dave, came through the stands trying to recruit two substitutes.

As it turned out, Rodney and I would be their first and only recruits. We were asked to do the job because we were the only guys sitting together who were without a date or a drink in our hands.

Rodney and I did not hesitate to say yes. For us — the baseball fanatics that we are — this was almost a dream come true. This was probably as close as we would ever come to actually being part of professional baseball team, even if it was as members of the ground crew.

Immediately after the game, we charged onto the field and awaited instructions on what to do. Ken and Dave helped us put the tarp (large pieces of plastic that protect the pitcher's mound, infield and other dirt areas from rain) on the visitor's bullpen.

Rodney and I knew what our next task was. We rushed over to the Knights' bullpen and covered the pitcher's mound with the tarp. We then put sandbags on the corners to hold the tarp down. A high five was in order, as we knew that we had done this by ourselves.

What we had to do next was what we were really there for — to put the large tarps on the infield. This required the strength of eight men pushing against a pipe, allowing the tarp to unroll. The wind made it difficult, blowing the wet and muddy tarp back in our faces.

We eventually covered the left side of the infield with the first tarp. With the second tarp, we covered the right side of the diamond. Our job was done.

What made the occasion even more special was that this was only the sixth time in 50 games that the tarp had been put on the field.

The job did come with some advantages. We received free drinks for the rest of the evening, free tickets for the rest of the season, and we were paid handsomely for about 15 minutes of work.

Despite the dirty hands and shoes, being a member of the ground crew for one night was worth it. I will always remember one steamy summer night in which a friend and I were able to fulfill a childhood dream and be a part of a professional baseball team.

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