

■ **BASEBALL**

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JAMES D. CIMBUREK/P&D

ABOVE: Even while the game is going on, there is a lot of activity outside the stadium. Here, youngsters play behind the field while they wait for foul balls.

winner, and would have to come out to home plate after the game.

"I thought I was winning some money," she joked later. Instead, she was presented with a ring by Mueller, and though Schmidt joked she didn't remember actually saying 'yes,' the large crowd in attendance showered them with applause.

With the idea that every Crofton vs. Wynot amateur baseball game is more of an event than an actual sporting contest, the *Press & Democrat* sports staff decided to take its readers behind the scenes. We wanted to spend a few minutes with various people at the ballpark, from the managers and players, to fans, to concession stand volunteers, to ticket takers (a mother and daughter) at the front entrance, to umpires and everyone in between.

What follows is a kind of running diary during the night:

5:30 p.m. — Two hours before the game, there are two Crofton players in the dugout. Other than that, the park is empty.

5:35 p.m. — The real action this early before the game is at the hitting cage, behind the left field fence. Ben Hegge is throwing to cousin Brandon Hegge, but Ben won't be doing more than that on this night. He pitched eight innings against Akron (Iowa) on Wednesday night. "No, I probably won't play at all tonight," Ben said.

5:49 p.m. — Bob Hegge is walking through the park, cleaning the trash from the bleachers. He's wearing a Ringwood Hawks T-shirt, bearing the logo of the team his daughter, Amber, is play-

ing for down in Australia. Bob's wife, Helene, is busy preparing the concession stand.

6:05 p.m. — Back at the hitting cage, Crofton manager Carl Schieffer is drilled in the sternum while throwing to one of his players. Any effect on Schieffer's availability for the game? Not at all. He said earlier in the week he can remember missing only three games in his amateur career, which dates back to 1998. "And two of those were for my honeymoon," Schieffer joked earlier in the day.

6:45 p.m. — Crofton starting pitcher Rand Thygeson is doing long toss from the right-center field fence to Schieffer, who is standing along the third base line. That's easily 300 feet away.

6:55 p.m. — The night got started early for Julie Steffen and her daughter, Anna. They were working the front entrance, taking money from spectators and directing traffic into the lot. Normally, Anna (who works most every Crofton game) arrives at the park at 6:45. "It's a nice night and it's a big game," she said. In other words, the

combination of the post-game fireworks show and a traditionally-competitive showdown means a large crowd. "This is typical small town America baseball," says Julie, as she approaches an incoming vehicle.

7:15 p.m. — The two umpires, Miles Death (home plate) and Jason Vaith (bases), make their way to the field. For Vaith, a Scotland native, it's a change of pace for him. "It's a lot different than playing," said Vaith, who had surgery on his right arm and is not playing this summer. Will he return to action next year? "That's the plan," he said.

7:31 p.m. — First pitch from Thygeson is a strike to Wynot's Chase Rolfes.

8:15 p.m. — The first run of the game comes on a Kyle Mueller single in the bottom of the third inning, scoring Tyler Zimmerman.

8:20 p.m. — Perhaps nobody knows the history of Crofton baseball better than Marv Hegge. The 79-year-old Crofton resident not only attends nearly every game at the Crofton Baseball Park, but he can clearly remember every detail from his playing

days.

"Baseball's always been big in Crofton," Hegge said, as he watched the action. "We all always joke that Crofton people talk baseball on New Year's Eve."

Hegge started playing with the Bluejays out of high school in 1953, back when the Bluejays were a semipro team. "We had players from all over," he said. "We used to say we had three teams, 'one here, one coming and one going.'"

The only problem was, the baseball field in Crofton was far from first-class.

The team's manager said he wore out two Pontiacs dragging the infield, Hegge said. "There were broken Coke bottles and pieces of brick," he said. "The infield was horrible."

Crofton asked the city for some help with facilities, but Hegge said there wasn't much support provided. From there, a baseball organization was formed, with membership fees going toward facility improvements — Hegge was the group's first president.

Zimmerman RBI double, pushing the lead to 3-0. That chases Wynot pitcher Scott Morrison.

9:16 p.m. — Overheard by a visitor to the press box: "I don't know how they do it, but these two teams always bring their 'A' games."

9:40 p.m. — Thygeson strikes out Cliff Kephart to end the game. He allowed five hits and struck out 11 batters.

9:46 p.m. — Crofton's Kyle Mueller surprised his girlfriend, Lakyn Schmidt, with a proposal at home plate during a fake raffle ticket promotion. Schmidt walked out to the field with the couple's son, Reed, assuming she won money. Nope, there was a ring waiting for her instead. Schmidt said yes, and the crowd — with the news from PA announcer Joe Van Goor —





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