

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE BIG TRAIN*

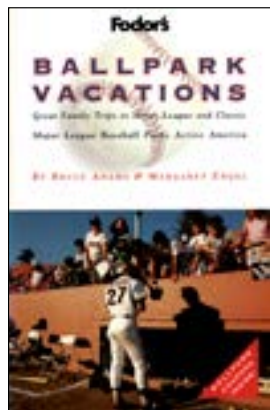
(*But Haven't Had a Chance to Ask)

We get lots of questions about the Big Train during the season and throughout the year. We asked **Big Train founder Bruce Adams** to answer twenty of the most frequently asked questions as part of our celebration of the 20th season of Bethesda Big Train baseball at Shirley Povich Field.

1. Where did the idea for the Big Train come from?

After completing my second term on the County Council in 1994, Denise Gorham of BCC Baseball assigned me to coach my son Hugh's rec team. I was embarrassed by the poor conditions of the fields. I had lived through the difficult budget times and understood the challenge faced by the Parks department. It seemed to me we needed a public-private partnership to improve the fields. Government dollars alone would not be sufficient. Unfortunately, I quickly learned that folks with resources were less than thrilled with my idea of spending their money in other parts of the county. I wasn't making progress, and I needed a new plan.

The breakthrough moment came on August 28, 1995 at Damaschke Field in Oneonta, New York, just south of the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. That summer, my wife Peggy Engel, kids Emily and Hugh, and I set off on a two summer 25,000 mile adventure that took us to 44 states and two Canadian provinces to see 85 baseball games in 82 different stadiums. It was a tough job, but someone had to do it. As Larry King said: "If you have to have an obsession, make it baseball." Fodor's published our *Ballpark Vacations: Great Family Trips to Minor League and Classic Major League Baseball Parks Across America* in 1997.



Hugh was five years old that summer. He had figured out that the place to get baseballs was the visiting team's bullpen. The visiting team didn't own the balls, and there wasn't much adult supervision in the bullpen before the game. He came home from our road trip with a bucket of balls. Peggy and I were interviewing Sam Nader, the legendary owner of Oneonta's Class A affiliate of the New York Yankees who happened to be Ralph Nader's uncle, when it dawned on me that I hadn't seen five year old Hugh in quite awhile.

I went down to the visiting team bullpen, and there he was chatting it up with a group of newly minted professional ballplayers. Apparently, they were intrigued by his baseball

adventure, and they asked me if I knew about summer college baseball. I mentioned that I knew about the Cape Cod League, but that was about the limit of my knowledge. When I said we lived near Washington, one of the players said he had played in the Shenandoah Valley League the previous summer. I told him I was a baseball fanatic and that I couldn't imagine there being a great baseball scene 90 minutes from my house that I didn't know about. He assured me I would be impressed by the quality of play in the Valley League. I went back to Peggy and said that if the Valley League is anywhere near as great as the player described, we had a really good *Washington Post Sunday Magazine* article to write.

In the summer of 1996, when we weren't on the road finishing our research for *Ballpark Vacations*, we were watching games in small towns across the Shenandoah Valley. We fell in love with the New Market Rebels. The players

lived in homes of local residents and worked by day in local businesses. Seemingly half the town turned out at night for the games. The players watered, raked, and lined the fields. Parking was free, programs cost a quarter, and hot dogs were a dollar. Members of the booster club sold raffle tickets during the game, and a 75 year old former FBI agent played "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" on a celluloid accordion at the seventh inning stretch. The food was adequate, but the locals knew to stroll through a neighbor's yard to Pack's Frozen Custard where everything was finer topped by the homemade black raspberry sauce. The players shook hands after the game.



Big Train Founder Bruce Adams was first in line to eat a cicada June 23, 2004 and get an "I ate a Cicada at Povich Field" t-shirt.

It was pure pleasure. As I drove home from those weekends, I thought about what fun it would be to be part of the Valley League. It combined two of my passions — building community values and baseball at its most genuine. But then I realized that life commuting between Bethesda and the Valley on I-66 every summer night might get old quickly. Right after our article appeared as "Minor Classic" in *The Washington Post* on March 16, 1997, I got a call. Most of you have received a call like this. The person doesn't start by saying, "You are an idiot." But you know that is exactly what he is thinking. "Don't you know there is a league just like the Valley League right here in the Washington region?" No, I did not. He told me about the Clark C. Griffith Collegiate Baseball League. I was intrigued. What I learned after seeing a couple of games that summer was that, yes, it was wooden bat baseball played by top college players. But, no, it wasn't the Shenandoah Valley League. It didn't have the community involvement. It didn't have the crowds of fans. I asked league officials why their teams didn't have community support, and they told me they were baseball guys and didn't know how to build community.

So now I had a plan. It would be just like Paul Newman's salad dressing. Actor Paul Newman started Newman's Own in 1982. The company gives its profits from the sale of its salad dressing and other products to educational and charitable organizations. With all due respect to Paul Newman, I was pretty sure it would be more fun to make baseball than salad dressing. We would build a ballpark, organize a team in the Griffith League, and take the money we made from selling tickets and hot dogs and t-shirts and spend it to improve youth baseball fields. We would use as our model the successful minor league teams that understood that the key to building a fan base was to provide a family friendly atmosphere with nightly entertainment that was more than just a baseball game. Over the last two decades, more and more community nonprofits have followed this model of providing services and goods as a way to supplement charitable giving and government grants.



2. What did it take to move this idea to reality?

Now we needed an organization to make this happen. The community values orientation of the Valley League's New Market Rebels was our model. The Griffith League agreed in the fall of 1997 to include a team from Bethesda. I sent notes to a bunch of my baseball crazy friends inviting them to a meeting in my living room. I was introducing the idea to the eight or ten people at the meeting when John Ourisman walked in. John said barely a word as I laid out my fundraising and other plans, but he stuck around after everyone else had left. John very gently let me know that my fundraising plan wouldn't work. The good news was that he was willing to help. He loved the idea of a community owned baseball