

For Baseball That Feels Right, Try Bethesda at Night

Eleven miles down the road, they're spending \$600 million, give or take a few bucks, to prove that Washington is a big league town. In Bethesda, Bruce Adams spends his summer evenings and a few dollars perfecting the ultimate small-town fantasy.

Before Washington was restored to the major leagues, this region had turned into one of the most successful spots in the country for minor league baseball, where \$7 buys you carousels and fireworks and a rich guy's view of the action on the field.

But step down yet another level from those professional teams in Bowie, Frederick and Woodbridge and you'll find capacity crowds for amateur baseball in its purest form — in, of all places, tony Bethesda. Just a couple of blocks from Montgomery Mall, in a county park better known for its ice rink, the Bethesda Big Train — the name honors native son and Hall of Fame pitcher Walter Johnson — plays at 700-seat Shirley Povich Field, named for the late, great Washington Post sportswriter.

That's Adams, the team owner, walking

the stands hawking raffle tickets. When a foul ball heads over the stands and down toward the grassy patch where the little kids play, it's the owner's wife who shouts, "Heads up!" as she hurries back to the concession stand, where she's doing popcorn and nachos duty.

The players, who aren't paid to play, are college kids who spend their summer here, living with volunteer families in Wheaton, Germantown, Olney and Bethesda, doing their own laundry and working mornings at the team's day camp in exchange for meal and gas money.

This is the Big Train's eighth summer, and already four of the team's alumni have made it all the way to the Big Show. More than 30 others are clawing their way up through the minors. More important, hundreds of local kids have had a chance to watch the game through the holes in the centerfield scoreboard as they slipped in the numbers on the hand-operated sign.

In a video game world, this is as retro a summer's eve as most kids will know, and

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they can't get enough of it.

Some fans come for the gimmicks — like Fire and Rescue Appreciation Night, complete with firetrucks for the kids to climb aboard; Mom Appreciation Night, featuring free roses for the first 200 mothers to show up; and the Lemonade Shaking Guy from Camden Yards.

This is baseball in the spirit of Bill Veeck, the legendary former Chicago White Sox owner who put fannies in the seats by any means possible, including putting a midget in a game (let the pitchers try to throw that guy a strike) and hiring a one-armed pitcher. Veeck's son, Mike, is a guru of the sport's lesser leagues, a marketing wizard who owns six minor league teams and serves as a consultant and model to many others.

Years ago, when Adams and his wife, Peggy Engel, were researching a travel book on baseball vacations, they befriended Mike Veeck. So when Adams and his partner, John Ourisman (of the car dealer family), got the Big Train rolling, they borrowed some Veeck ideas, such as the infamous Bridesmaids' Dresses Night. That's when fans are invited to bring along those ugly formal dresses



BETHESDA BIG TRAIN

Big Train players celebrate after winning the league championship in 2004. It's amateur baseball, but the play is good enough to attract major league scouts.

that hang in the very back of the closet — fans then select the ugliest of all, and the owner wins a prize.

On the field, the quality of play is strong enough to attract a steady stream of major league scouts, who get in free, as do any kids wearing Little League uniforms. (Adult tickets are \$7; kids pay \$3.) Adams pumps

the profits into refurbishing neglected sports fields in the District and Montgomery County.

But it's the total package that brings in families: the water balloon tossing contest after the third inning, the chance to send the kids down to run out onto the field with the players, the easygoing atmosphere that makes

it possible one night for a Big Train player, Adam Redd, a star pitcher at Virginia Tech, to pull the ancient but still thrilling stunt of playing a different position every inning.

Redd takes a turn at first base and forgets to hold the runner on the base; he laughs at his mistake, points to the base and trots over as the crowd chuckles along with him.

There are other college summer leagues in the country — a famous one on Cape Cod, one that plays in a sweet collection of small-town parks in the Shenandoah Valley, even a league with a dramatically different setting in Alaska. But none of the others sit in the heart of a major metropolis.

Most of the parks dotted around Maryland in the Cal Ripken League are suburban high school fields. The Big Train is the only team with a park of its own. It makes you forget about all the politics and the money and the wrangling that have soiled the big league game. This is the real thing.

The Big Train (www.bigtrain.org) plays a doubleheader at home Friday, with games Saturday and Sunday and through the end of July.

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