

Dreams never wane for sandlot hopefuls

By Tom Henderson
staff writer

"Baseball is Americana. Any kid who thinks he can play ball deserves a chance to prove it. Even if he's terrible, if he can't run or throw, if he thinks he can, we'll look at him."

Chuck Tanner, the manager of the Pittsburgh Pirates, explaining why the Pirates are one of the few teams in baseball who still conduct regular tryout camps.

TERRY CROWLEY peered in at the catcher, motioned that he was coming in with the fast ball, kicked up a lanky leg till it was even with his eyes, then came over the top with his hard one.

Crowley, 20, of Detroit didn't look much like a baseball player — he had long, baggy sweatpants and his keys were tied to the shoelaces of his work boots. But you can't always tell talent by the cut of its cloth — the Cincinnati Reds scouts had been around long enough to know that — and so Crowley was getting just as good a test as the rest of the 51 hopefuls who showed up Tuesday morning at Ford Field in Livonia for a public tryout camp.

The signal said fast ball, the radar gun said otherwise: 66 ft read, slow for a change up, practically stop-action for a fastball. His curve hit 61 on the JUGS gun and in the dirt, three feet wide of the plate.

"What else you throw?" asked the scout.

"A submarine," Crowley said. Submarine it did, into the ground barely halfway to the plate.

The scout, Fred Hayes, a wizened old timer with a leathery neck and forearms from too many mornings in the sun timing kids, wrote "NP" on a

chart next to Crowley's name: No prospect.

"Thanks, son. Next," said Hayes. "Next" throws 72, 69, 73. He is wild, breathing hard, wild-eyed, scared stiff. Relax," says Glenn Scala, who holds the radar gun. "You're hyperventilating, man, slow down."

AND, FOR THE MOST part, so it goes. In the 60-yard dash, where "a 6.5 will really make our eyes pop," according to head scout Gene Bennett, many of the kids plug across the line in 7.5 seconds. Only 14 of the 51 are under seven seconds and worthy of retesting and another look.

Of the 12 pitchers, only four have fastballs above 60.

One of the 12 is Scott Smith, 17, who will be a senior at Southfield Lathrup. He attributes his 1-6 record this year to a "real bad defense." He is wild, high and consistently at 74-75 on the gun. Good size, average arm: NP.

Another is Mike Miller, 16, a senior in the fall at Bishop Borgess. He keeps the ball low and throws a split-fist fastball in addition to a regular fastball and curve. But the gun says, "78, 77, 78" and Hayes says, "NP."

The attrition rate is high for infielders and outfielders, too. One of them is in a soccer uniform and boots the ball accordingly. Another stands 5-foot-4 and weighs no more than 120. Would-be shortstops bounce throws 15 feet in front of the bag at first.

Finally, the group of 51 is weeded down to 30 — four pitchers, two catchers (including Kevin Moore of Redford Union, who has a cannon instead of a right arm), eight infielders and six outfielders.

The 31 who bid adieu are done so politely. For instance, Hayes tells the pitchers:

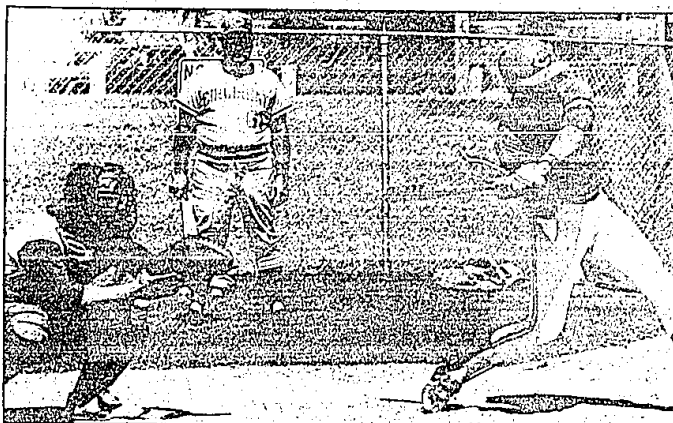
"This baseball is a great game. So, don't give up on it. Especially you young ones, stick with it. It's a great time and a great game. Go to every tryout camp you can. Work on it. I personally want to thank every one of you for taking the time to come out. If there's anything we can do, if there's any question you want answered, we'll be glad to help you."

THE 20 survivors split up for a brief scrimmage, though by that point, the scouts pretty well had their minds made up. The stopwatch and radar gun told much of the story; so did watching the kids throw from the outfield or from deep in the hole at short; the scrimmage was more a showing than a chance to continue showing their skills.

According to Bennett, the camps are intended to pay long-term benefits, not to turn up some phenom worthy of instant signing and stardom. He runs 25 of the camps throughout the Midwest, while the Reds run nearly 600 nationwide.

"Most of these kids are ineligible," Bennett explained during the scrimmage. The ones in high school, we can't draft, and the ones in college who are under 21 are ineligible. What we're doing is adding to the files. The ones we like, we'll ask them back to other camps. When it comes time that they are eligible, in one or two or three years, then we can draft them."

(Of recent Reds who have reached the majors after first coming to the team's attention in tryout camps were Don Gullett, who wowed them with his fastball when he was 15, and Dan Driessen and Doug Flynn, neither of whom was drafted but who stood out in subsequent tryouts.)



Cincinnati scout Gene Bennett (middle) watches Farmington's Scott Miller swing the bat during Tuesday morning's tryout camp at Ford Field in Livonia.

Of the 20 who survived the first cut Tuesday, only four were rated highly enough to get requests for repeat appearances. One was Cliff Simpson, 20, a Detroit area who played college ball for Voorhees (S.C.) State last year and who is transferring to Texas Southern next year. A pitcher who had a sharp curve and a fastball consistently timed in the mid-80s, he was the star of the camp and was invited back to Wednesday's camp in Warren.

"WE JUST drafted him," half-joked Bennett after one particularly impressive strikeout.

Another who was invited to Warren qualified for the best-name team, if nothing else. He was Fudarell (Magic) Maggitt of Detroit, a slick-fielding shortstop.

And the names of the other two who passed inspection (who will be notified by the Reds to appear at follow-up camps in August or next spring?) "Oh, we can't have that in the paper," said Bennett, breaking into a laugh. "Cincinnati won't stand for that. That's a secret."

Hayes chimed in: "Sparky sees their names in the paper and the Tigers'll be after 'em tomorrow."

They were joking, sort of. Without another word, they got in their car and drove back to the motel, to put the four names on file.

A FIFTH WINNER at the camp might have been Roger George, a former coach in the Livonia Collegiate League who runs the baseball program at Henry Ford Community College.

A handful of kids excited him, especially Maggitt and a knuckleballing rightlander named Greg McCormick, who also possessed an 84 mph fastball.

"I like what I see," said George, before making his pitch to them on behalf of the Hawk baseball program.



The players loosen up by doing a little jogging in the outfield. The Reds tryout camp attracted players from all over the state.

All the world loves a loser

Continued from Page 1

BUT, TAKE heart expert losers. The world loves a loser. Who, for example, doesn't love Charlie Brown? Is there a more popular loser than Ziggy?

Ziggy entered the human race and lost. "So, friends, the next time you're whipping yourself in a game of solitaire, or you're out to end the game leaving the tying run on third, or your invitation to dance gets rebuffed by the girl fitterbugging in her seat, or you go to watch a dog show and the official awards you first prize — remember, you losers are the majority and we are loved."

Take that Philip "Winning-is-the-name-of-the-game" Roth.

NCAA league strong

Some of the area's top basketball players, including 6-foot-8 Livonia Stevenson graduate Tom Domako, will be on display Friday in the Sandy Sanders summer league at Ann Arbor Huron High School.

The NCAA-sanctioned league for high school, college and pro players kicks off its three-game card at 6 p.m. Admission is free.

Domako, bound for Montana State, will be playing against Darrell Johnson, Michigan State; Hutch Wade and Roy Tarpley, Michigan; Stretch Carter and Brian Humes, University of Detroit; and the Pistons' Ishai Thomas.

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