

Baseball: Johnstown's game

WHAT FLOOD? A visitor last week to Johnstown, Pa., this reporter saw little evidence of the 1973 disaster.

The surrounding mountains are lush green and the air is crystal clear. This old industrial town is rid of the hydrogen sulfide odor that once plagued many northern industrial centers.

But after spending a few days talking to the natives of this quiet habitat, 1973 remains vivid.

"Rainied 21 straight days," said one Johnstown old-timer. "They had to move the tournament to Altoona."

"The economy never bounced back," said another.

But downtown Johnstown shows signs of life. Storefront businesses are attractive. City blocks have been turned into malls.

Although struggling to keep pace with the rest of the nation, Johnstown comes alive once a year.

THE FOCAL POINT is the All-American Amateur Baseball Association tournament. Sixteen teams east of the Mississippi battle for supremacy in the weekend event, which attracts some of the best college players in the nation.

The AAABA Tournament, born in 1945, has produced such major league greats as Al Kaline, Reggie Jackson and Joe Goss. Johnstown's own Pete Vukovich once played in the prestigious tourney.

The AAABA piqued my curiosity this season again because a local connection, the Livena Adray baseball team, was making its sixth trip to Johnstown.

Instead of taking reports over the phone, I decided to see the tourney firsthand.

Early in the Livena Collegiate Baseball League season, I made a pledge to my coaches Ron Hellier and Steve Rose to make sure I go to Johnstown if their team qualified.

"What a year to make a pledge," said Hellier, his team was struggling early in the season.

"You've got to go Johnstown, but I don't know if we'll be going with you," chimed in Rose in early July.

AS IT TURNED OUT, Livena won the league playoff and got out of its own AAABA regional, beating formidable teams from Philadelphia and Cleveland.

Holding true to my pledge, I jumped in Hellier's car for the 7 1/2-hour ride and suddenly found myself in baseball heaven.

Reflecting back on my four-day stay, several things stick out in my mind:

• Check-in at the Johnstown Holiday Inn. Every team must register at a designated time and for Livena it was 3:30 p.m. Sunday.

The players are whisked into a small room, in front of a group of prominent individuals from the Johnstown Old-timers Association, who proceed to read them the riot act.

"If you're caught drinking we're sending you straight home," said committee member Charles Fitzgerald. "We haven't had any destruction (by the players) here in our town for 41 years and we're not about to have any now."

"If you lose your key to your room it'll cost you \$15. If you're not in your room by midnight, you'll be locked out and on your way home. If you're not sleeping during a game, the whole team is going home."

"Does this mean reporters, too?" I whispered jokingly to Livena player Bob Foust.

• The AAABA banquet: Tickets were scarce for the affair — only 20 per team. Somehow, Hellier was able to snag a ticket for me from one of the Old-timers.

The dinner was sponsored by Coca-Cola, and the AAABA brass thanked the bottlers at least 10 times.

After the chicken dinner, the players were asked to vote for the AAABA Queen. Twenty 23 AAABA beauty queens were paraded in front of some 320 guys and the white thing got a little embarrassing. The Old-timers asked the girls to parade around a second time in their evening gowns and some of the girls looked like they were ready to crawl under a table. It was male chauvinism at its best, but the Old-timers were giving a grand time.

AAABA Queen Vince Lorenzo of Brooklyn then gave his "State of the Baseball Address." He painted a gloomy picture of the game and said, "We're not playing for fun anymore like the old days." I tend to agree, but I wish Vince would have been a

little more positive.

• The AAABA drawing: This was the most exciting part of the banquet until Livena Adray drew neighbor Detroit Adray Appliance in the first round.

"Why do we have to play each other when we could play right at home?" asked a depressed Hellier.

You could tell the players on both teams were not eager to play each other, especially Todd Krumm, the Michigan State footballer, who opted to play for the Detroit team this summer instead of Livena.

In Livena's 2-1 win over Detroit, I got the feeling Krumm felt uneasy playing against his former team mates. He was 0-for-5 and struck out to end the game.

Schenectady, N.Y., meanwhile, drew host Johnstown Coca-Cola. That meant they'd get to play opening night at Point Stadium in front of 12,000 fans.

"Never drawn Johnstown," Rose said. "That would be something for our kids."

• Point Stadium: What a unique ballpark, situated on the banks of the Allegheny River off the side of a huge hill.

The dimensions are similar to Fenway Park in Boston — 270 ft. left, with a 50-foot-high screen rising down left center. Dead center goes forever, some 480 feet and right field is 294 down the line, great for left-handed slacks.

The crowds for the night games were enormous. The whole town gets



Brad Emmons

behind the host team, chanting "Coke is it!"

For many of the natives, the AAABA tournament is the social event of the year. Streams of teenage girls, straight out of Mary Kay Cosmetics, cruise the scene.

The year, recalled Hellier, "one of our players almost got married down there. My daughter is in high school and now she wants to come down. I said to her, 'No way, honey!'"

• The scouts: During the course of the week, some 70 major league scouts invaded the 12 different playing venues around Johnstown.

Katalina of the Tigers, the man who signed Al Kaline, is a long-time visitor to the AAABA.

At Vo-Tech Field, where Livena met Columbus, Ohio, in the Iasser's bracket, longtime Tiger scout Peck Popovich renewed an old acquaintance in Ron Rozman, whose son, Rick, a pitcher, was making his fourth appearance in the Johnstown tourney with the Livena team.

Popovich, a member of the Tiger organization for 33 years, remem-

bered Rozman when he was a Triple-A player in spring training at Lakeland, Fla.

Nearly all the major league team sent representatives, including the Mets, Angels and Brewers.

• The players: Two come to mind.

The scouts were particularly taking note of Jimmy Abbott, the one-handed Detroit Adray Appliance pitcher from the University of Michigan, and his baseball pal Howard Freling, a first baseman at the University of North Carolina.

But I'll remember two players in particular.

Martin Eddy, a pickup for the Livena team, Eddy had three hits in 11 at-bats — all solo homers. He's already on his way to Dallas Baptist University.

The other was Andy Meltzer, the personable and hard-throwing left-fielder from the Philadelphia squad, who, with a hitched ride with one flight from the University of Pittsburgh to Johnstown (where the players were housed) to Point Stadium, talked glowingly about his Johnstown experience.

"I've never seen anything like it," said the Temple University sophomore. "These people here are something else the way they support this tournament."

"I hope I can come back again next year. This is a lot of fun."

I tend to agree, Andy. Not even a flood would stop me from coming back.

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