

photos by ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

The immortal words of George Kell — "This one looks like it's out of here" — ringing in his ears, Jim Radebaugh leveled a home run swing at a batting cage fast ball.

By James Radebaugh  
staff writer

# 'Put me in, coach, I'm ready to play!'

The top of my thumb where the skin wore off is beginning to dry up into a scab and though my right shoulder is still sore, I can raise my arm above my head without wincing, which I couldn't do yesterday. It's spring, the Tigers are already in last place, a new season is beginning for area softball leagues and the editor wanted a first-person account of a trip to a mechanical batting cage.

Is hitting a hardball flying past you at 70 miles an hour, she wondered, as easy as it looks?

I went to the Grand Slam Baseball Training Center Inc. in Royal Oak the other day to find out.

For \$1.25, you get an aluminum bat and a token good for 22 pitches. The cages are arranged in a semicircle around the pitching machines, which are positioned over a funnel-shaped depression that collects loose balls. Somehow, the pitching machines suck up the balls and shoot

them toward home plate in the cages.

AT GRAND Slam, the machines are adjusted to pitch an underhanded softball toss, a slow-pitch lob they call the candyman, and a fast-pitch hardball from 30 to 70 miles an hour. A warning sign tells you the pitches will come in both balls and strikes "to reflect actual game conditions." No beanballs, at least.

True to the assignment, I headed straight for the 70-miles-an-hour cage.

The first two pitches whipped past

and slammed into the rubber mat at the back of the cage before I had gripped the bat and struck a stance, in the batter's box.

I swung at the third pitch, though, and again at the fourth and the fifth, and eventually I hit something other than air. A foul tip popped behind the plate. I could hear George Kell saying I got a piece of it.

I swung again and connected. A solid line drive ript up the middle.

"That's gonna drop in for a base hit, Al."

I wanted to scream — not in joy, in pain. A shock wave that would have registered on the Richter scale shot through my forearms. Hitting a

ball traveling 70 miles an hour hurts.

The truth is, I've never been much of an athlete and I haven't played any hardball since junior high, when in the entire eighth-grade season I got to play twice, both times as a pinch runner.

But standing in the batter's box at Grand Slam reminded me of how much fun getting to bat is. As a kid I spent my time frustrated, waiting for my chance at the plate. So what could be better than ups that last for as long as you have cash in your pocket?

I put another token in and took another 22 swings, with little more suc-

cess. Each time I watched a little more skin on my thumb disappear. Other people, I noticed, were wearing gloves.

AND A GOOD crowd had come out on this particular afternoon. Some men were dressed as though they had come from work, and there were more than a few parents with several kids in tow. What was most interesting, perhaps, is that there were at least as many women and girls as there were men and boys, maybe more.

Tired of whiffing, I moved down to the 55-miles-an-hour cage. The pitches came slowly enough to focus on and I was able to hit at least as many as I missed. I sent a few into the net at far end of the enclosure.

I'm not sure I honed my technique any, and I'm pretty sure I don't care. Just standing there smacking baseballs was a great time. (The balls, by the way, aren't real baseballs. They're shaped like oversized golf balls and they're green. I bought some tokens and stayed a while longer.

## Hitch a ride on a wagon train to see the Wild West

By Iris Sanderson Jones  
Contributing travel editor

Q. Our son is really into buffaloes, Indians, wagon trains and the whole wild west thing. What can we do in a two week driving trip. We don't have time to drive all over the west.

J.F.  
Westland

A: You'll find it all in and around the Black Hills and the Badlands of South Dakota, 1,200 miles due west of Detroit. Spend two or three days exploring the landscape in either direction and you will still have plenty of time to see the wild west.

South Dakota is celebrating its centennial this year, so there are many special events. You can ride a wagon train, ride a Jeep right into a buffalo herd, explore Indian lore and have fun in old west towns like Deadwood.

Rapid City, at the foot of the Black Hills, is the logical home base. The Centennial Wagon Train retraces pioneer trails. There is an Eastern and a Western division, each with at least 100 wagons. They are already on the trail and you can climb aboard anywhere along the route until Aug. 29, when they reach the state fair in Huron.

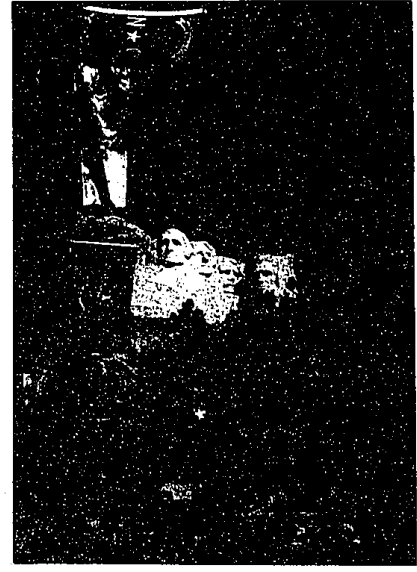
You can join a train before it starts for the day, during breaks (mid-morning, noon and mid-afternoon) or when they set up camp for the evening, but not while the train is actually moving.

Stay for part of a day or camp overnight with your own provisions. Many communities will hold barbecues and potlucks when the train arrives in town. Sleep in your own wagon tent, RV, sleeping bag, or in a motel.

HERE'S HOW you do it. Write to the South Dakota Centennial Commission, 500 East Capitol Ave., Pierre, S.D. 57501, or call (605) 773-4935 for a wagon train map and other centennial information. For

tourist information on South Dakota, including their 160-page tourism guide, call the tourist department toll-free at 1-(800)-843-1930.

When you join the wagon train, somewhere along its route, ask for



MICKY JONES

the train secretary, who will sell you an identification button — \$5 for adults, \$2 for those under 18. The Western Division also charges \$25 per wagon or \$10 per horseback. There's no extra charge on the Eastern Division train.

That should get you into the mood of the old wild west!

Now you must plan the rest of your trip. The Badlands are an hour's drive east of Rapid City. Take the 38-mile Badlands Loop off I-90. Enjoy the red saw-toothed skyline of this lunar landscape and introduce your to the Oglala Indians who operate the Cedar Pass Lodge. Order the "Indian tacos" for lunch.

Continue west to the town of Wall. Wall Drug Store, with all its mechanical bands and other fun things, is one of the biggest tourist attractions in the state. It was just a drug store in a small town until its owner put signs out on the highway — "Free ice water in Wall, South Dakota." Now it has tourist attractions galore.

It's a straight run from Wall into Rapid City. Don't miss mammoths, dinosaurs, Tyrannosaurus Rex and other giant mammals in the Museum of Geology at the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology. Both you and the kids will love it.

OF COURSE, you must stop at Mount Rushmore (average stop 80 minutes), where sculptor Gutzon Borglum carved presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt into the mountain side.

But the real destination for buffalo lovers should be Custer State Park, with its wild buffalo herds.

There were once 50 million buffaloes on the Great Plains. After George Custer discovered the gold that lured the prospectors to the hills in 1874, driving the Sioux from their sacred hills, there were only about 100 of the great bison left.

Local ranchers saved the buffaloes, donated them to the park and

## Black Hills offer plenty to see, do

helped create the present national count of 45,000 animals, most raised privately for food.

Ask at the entrance or at the visitor center for the present location of the herd. You might have to drive to a specific location to see the great herds grazing, but you are likely to see a few strays along any road.

Buffaloes weigh about 2,500 pounds and are not afraid of anything, including wild tourists, so hand out a horse, the tourist was quickly caught and flipped over. Fortunately for the tourist, the buffalo got bored and walked away.

Question: Where do the buffaloes roost?

Answer: Anywhere they damn well please!

IF YOU want to go off the road, pay for one of the Jeep tours that leave regularly from the State Game Lodge. They can leave the highway and drive right up to the herd. If you have the instincts for a buffalo hunt, join the buffalo roundup, held in September, and watch the great animals corralled, branded and vaccinated for brucellosis.

Question: Do the bulls get vaccinated?

Answer: Not unless they want to get vaccinated!

The Wildlife Loop, State #7 south, is usually a good place to see the great dumb beasts. It also takes you to Wind Cave National Park, which has its own buffalo herd and thou-

sands of upright sun-sniffing prairie dogs, sleek little underground "critters" that look like wet squirrels and bark like dogs.

Keep going south to the visitor center at the Mammoth Site in Hot Springs, where 48,000-year-old mammoths have been unearthed. You can wash the dust off at Evans Plunge, a natural spring-cum-swimming pool, also in Hot Springs.

State Highway 47, the Needles Highway, will take you past eerie stone spires, the granite cores of long dead volcanoes. Stop for lunch or overnight at Sylvan Lake Lodge and then go on to the Crazy Horse Memorial.

Some people say sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski was the crazy one, when he agreed to carve the horse and Indian that ride forever in stone across a mountain face. He started decades ago and the work continues after his death.

The hills are full of tourist attractions. I recommend the Black Hills Petrified Forest, where you can get a graduate course in geology in 10 minutes. Spend an afternoon and an evening in Deadwood, where Wild Bill Hickock was shot dead in Saloon #10 and is buried next to Calamity Jane in Mt. Moriah Cemetery.

IF YOUVE got more time, see the Passion Play at Spearfish, and the sacred mountain, Bear Butte, near Sturgis. The Sundance Kid was named after the town of Sundance, half an hour west on US-14 in the Wyoming end of the Black Hills.

Fearless climbers still scale the sheer walls of nearby Devil's Tower, which you may have seen in the movie Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

The Devil's Tower is a sacred mountain, too. The Indians called it Mato Tepee or Bear Lodge because legend says a bear chased seven girls up to the top of the Tower, where Wakantanka, the Great Mystery, changed them into the seven stars of the Big Dipper.