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BASEBALL *in the* 
HEARTLAND

Every June, the
College World Series
descends upon
the city of Omaha,
and residents and
visitors alike make
the event their own

By Craig Tapper

The anticipation builds as soon as the ball is popped up behind the plate. Typically, fans are excited about balls that head out to center field, but here, they are equally energized by the reverse situation.

The ball lands safely in the netting and begins to roll down, picking up pace with each rotation. A hush falls over the 23,000 in attendance as the ball reaches the end of the net.

And then it drops.

The ball girl mishandles the play off the net and the boobirds come out as if she pulled a Bill Buckner. Here, at Johnny Rosenblatt Stadium in Omaha, Nebraska, at the College World Series, it is acceptable — encouraged even — to taunt the ball girl.

“It’s just part of the tradition, and it’s one of those things that’s all in good fun,” said Clemson University outfielder Wilson Boyd. “It’s an amazing atmosphere, and that’s just what makes Rosenblatt, Rosenblatt.”

Since 1950, the top collegiate teams have descended upon the “Diamond on the Hill.” On this field, heroes have been made, memories emblazoned and championships captured. And while winning a title is what annually brings 250 student-athletes to the western shores of the Missouri River, the College World Series is much more than a battle for national supremacy.

It’s a story about people.

And right now, they are all booing the ball girl.

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“Do you want a beer?”

A puzzled patron stares at Greg Pivovar, the owner of Stadium View Sports Cards, a sports memorabilia store on the west side of Rosenblatt Stadium.

“It’s free,” Pivovar adds in an effort to eliminate the obvious confusion that arises when a store owner offers a customer a complimentary brewski simply for walking through the front door.

After the requisite identification check, the customer gladly accepts the cold one, joining the ranks of the more than 40,000 patrons who have accepted the beers that Pivovar has freely doled out since opening the store in 1992.

“When I first moved in here, there was only one place around to get beer, and I just decided I was going to give it away,” says Pivovar, who is an attorney, but owns and operates the store as a hobby. “It’s kind of ballooned from there. We usually give away about 100 cases of beer a year, but this year, we will probably do 200 cases.”

Pivovar’s warmth may seem extraordinary, but his hospitality is actually a reflection of the people of Omaha and the way they have embraced the College World Series and the visitors it draws.

Besides providing a welcoming atmosphere, the citizens of Omaha are known for rallying around the underdog. This year, thousands of locals are sporting Texas Christian University T-shirts, and it is not uncommon to see Omahans walking around displaying the Horned Frogs' signature hand sign — the index and middle fingers curled downward like prongs in a playful attempt to intimidate opposing fans.

“For TCU, being the only team that has never been here before this year, it means a lot to them,” says Brock Workman, an Omaha native and student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who ditches his Cornhuskers garb for a purple TCU top. “The underdogs usually get a pretty big fan base. The big schools — Florida, Miami, North Carolina, Texas — they always get huge crowds, but I think everyone secretly wants the underdogs to pull through.”

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It's 5:51 p.m. on Friday, June 18, more than two hours before the opening ceremonies of the College World Series, but Rosenblatt Stadium is already bustling. It is the final season of the 'Blatt, so who can blame the throngs of people for taking in a site they will never see again?

Outside of the stadium, a group that goes by the name "Last Year's Champions" is bringing flavor to the experience — literally. For the last 11 years, the group's roughly 30 members, whose day jobs range from symphony musicians to attorneys, spend 20 to 30 hours each to prepare succulent barbecue for the eight teams prior to the opening ceremony.

"This is our stamp, this is being a part of the College World Series, which is huge," says orthopedic surgeon Sam Phillips, the leader of the group. "Omaha loves the College World Series, and all these guys love barbecue. How better to combine that?"

Last Year's Champions, which is hired by the College World Series for the event, begins smoking the meats in the parking lot down the right-field line the night before the event. This year, they are preparing 1,600 pounds of meat: 450 pounds of brisket, 400 pounds of pork, 400 pounds of chicken and 350 pounds of ribs.

"I'm a big-time barbecue fan," says Mitchell Beacom, a reliever for the University of California, Los Angeles. "I'm from Southern California, but barbecue from here crushes it."

The all-you-can-eat meat monstrosity is the only opportunity for all eight teams to dine in the same place at the same time, and it gives the visitors a taste of life in Omaha.

"There are very few vegetarians in Omaha," says Phil Davidson, Phillips' sidekick. "Meat is the Nebraska experience. I think there are two vegetarian restaurants in Omaha. Everything is about being a carnivore."



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As you walk around the back of the 'Blatt and weave through the mobs of fans that make up the general admission line for bleacher seats, a smell arises that is different from the hot dogs and burgers that dominate the menu at tailgates across the country.

Sandwiched in a parking lot between Rosenblatt and Interstate 80 is a crew of Cajuns from southern Louisiana that head to Omaha even if their Louisiana State University Tigers fail to qualify.

"We always wanted to come to the College World Series, and when the [University of Louisiana at Lafayette Ragin'] Cajuns and the Tigers made it [in 2000], it was a no-brainer," says Stan Evans, who is described by many members of the traveling caravan as the head chef. "I picked my friend up in my Toyota Camry, and we loaded up one ice chest, a bunch of Cajun food and a couple of sleeping bags. We drove overnight to come here with no tickets and no hotel."

Though his first visit was fueled by the desire to watch the Louisiana teams in action, Evans and his cronies return every year regardless.

"We like our hometown teams, but it is just as enjoyable when you see a bunch of new teams that haven't been here," Evans says. "The whole thing is the baseball. These kids, 95 percent of them won't play professional baseball, so they're trying 120 percent."

This year, about 30 people joined Evans on the trip. They have U-Hauls full of Cajun food and openly share their grub with fellow tailgaters, local law enforcement and parking attendants. From jambalaya to crawfish étouffée and grillades to boudin, Evans cooks up tasty foods for the masses.

"We're outgoing, and we like to share," Evans says. "Everyone we meet here we consider part of our extended family."



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Thousands of others make the trip to Omaha with no vested rooting interest. Some come for the high-quality baseball, some come to experience Rosenblatt, some make the trek solely for the tailgating, and others come because Middle America serves as an ideal meeting point for families and friends.

Brothers Randy Martinez of Kansas City and Pete Martinez of Oceanside, California, met here for the 2009 Series and are back again.

Randy has to return home after the opening weekend of games, but Pete plans to stick around even though he has no logistics planned — a common tale among visitors craving a carefree baseball atmosphere.

“I don’t know where I am staying, but I’ll figure it out,” Pete says. “I don’t know how I am going to get from here to a hotel, but I’ll figure it out. I have no tickets, but I’ll figure it out.”

Though his plans are unknown, when Pete gets hungry, he can always make a pit stop at Evans’ Cajun-style tailgate for delicious grub and unrivaled friendliness.

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Look to the left and a group of fans is decked out in the garnet and gold of Florida State University. Look to the right and you'll see others proudly donning the crimson and cream of the University of Oklahoma. The College World Series draws a rainbow of colors, cultures and personalities. Yet, at the end of the day, these groups of fans all come for the same reason: to support their team in its quest for a national championship.

"I knew we would have a strong showing just based on the type of showing we have at big road football games, like the Clemson game [in 2009] or the BCS game [against Boise State University in 2010]," says Andrew Ward, a former linebacker at TCU, who met up with dozens of friends, including former TCU baseball and football players, for the Horned Frogs' first trip to Omaha. "We have a pretty religious group that follow it around."

Teams and fans from Arizona (Arizona State University), California (UCLA), Florida (FSU and the University of Florida), Oklahoma (OU), South Carolina (Clemson and the University of South Carolina) and Texas (TCU) are represented.

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"We absolutely noticed [the TCU fans in attendance]," says TCU catcher Bryan Holaday following the Horned Frogs' opening-game victory over FSU. "It was just great, all the fan support. With everyone that's behind us, the Fort Worth people that came to watch us and the hometown people that are supporting us, it's been great."

The Skinner family, which includes three generations who reside in various locations throughout Oklahoma, all meet to cheer on the Sooners, as does the three-generation Johnson family from Azle, Texas.

"We're really big Oklahoma fans," says James Johnson, who drove more than 650 miles in an RV with his father, Jimmy, and 7-year-old son, Gatlin. "This is our first time here, and we're going to be in town until we see the Sooners win."

Johnson's Sooners and his RV would be sent packing after three games, but other fan bases would remain. UCLA's and South Carolina's supporters were around the longest. Their teams met in a best-of-three championship series in which South Carolina captured the title on a walk-off hit in Game 2.

"I'm sure there is no better feeling than watching your team celebrate at Rosenblatt after winning the World Series," says Howard Smith, who visited Omaha to meet with friends and experience the stadium before its closing. "When you think about all the history that has been made there over the years, that was a remarkable way to close it out." ❧



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