



Fans pack baseball classic

Abilenians show love of game at Driggers Field

By Kyle Peveto



Three-year-old Braden Lewis plays an imaginary game of baseball in the stands while the Texas Heat play the Abilene Blue Sox during an exhibition game at McMurry University's Driggers Field on Tuesday, July 24, 2007.

Reporter-News photo by Thomas Metthe

Outside McMurry University's Driggers Field Tuesday evening, cars and trucks filled the parking lots, city streets and vacant lots off Sayles Boulevard. Hundreds of Abilene baseball fans had come early to stake out spots for the Abilene Pro Baseball Classic, a match-up between all-star players from local college and high school teams and a minor league team, the Texas Heat of the Continental Baseball League.

Seated a few rows up from the first-base line, Hollis Newberry waited for the first pitch. After spending many of his 82 years in Abilene as a baseball fan, Newberry has supported the minor league Blue Sox, who played in town from 1946 to 1957, and the Prairie Dogs, who played for four years in the 1990s. "I love baseball, just watching the team effort," Newberry said, smiling and looking across the field to the cloudless blue sky. It's the perfect afternoon for baseball. Like many of the 800 or so fans who paid their \$7 admission, Newberry misses minor league baseball in the Big Country and said he would support another team. Tuesday's exhibition game, organized by Dallas-based FanPRO sports, was billed as a tryout to judge the city's potential for a club. "It's a great showing," said Nicole Standly, a team partner with FanPRO. "It's not surprising because it's Abilene, but it's definitely exciting."

Fans of all ages filled the stands at Driggers and rooted for the local players, who wore Blue Sox jerseys. Russ Altman, president of the Abilene South Junior/ Senior League baseball league, watched the game from the aisle between the lower and upper levels. "A lot of people in this stadium have watched a lot of baseball," Altman said. "Coming up through the league, I've seen a lot of these fans before." FanPRO has discussed building a stadium to attract a team and fans. "We'd love to be in Abilene," said Ron Baron, president and CEO of the CBL. "This is a wonderful family-oriented community, and family and Americana and baseball go together so well."

During the second inning, Connor Zimmerlee, 8, sat with his parents, Alethia and Darren Zimmerlee, on the third-base side of the stands, watching Abilene Christian University pitcher Chris Wiman throw fastballs to the professional batters. Connor looks up to the Texas Rangers' Hank Blalock and plays third base for his youth baseball team. "I'm looking forward to the Abilene all-stars winning," he said just before Wiman struck out a Heat player on a hard fastball.

The Zimmerlees said they watch local college and high school games often, and they try to make it to Arlington a few times each summer to catch Texas Rangers' games. The couple said they hope to see more high-level baseball as a family in the summer. "We were at almost all the Prairie Dog games," Alethia said. "We miss it, and we want it back. That's why we're here."