

Eugene Emeralds offer entertainment

Not many fans seem interested in showing up early.

On press row, KVAL sports director Walt Fox regards the nearly empty stands while lobbing peanut shells at KEZI cameraman Tim Jacobson. Jacobson's mentor, sports director Todd McKim, verbally imagines his 11 p.m. word to his viewers: "The crowd arrived so late, the game was over."

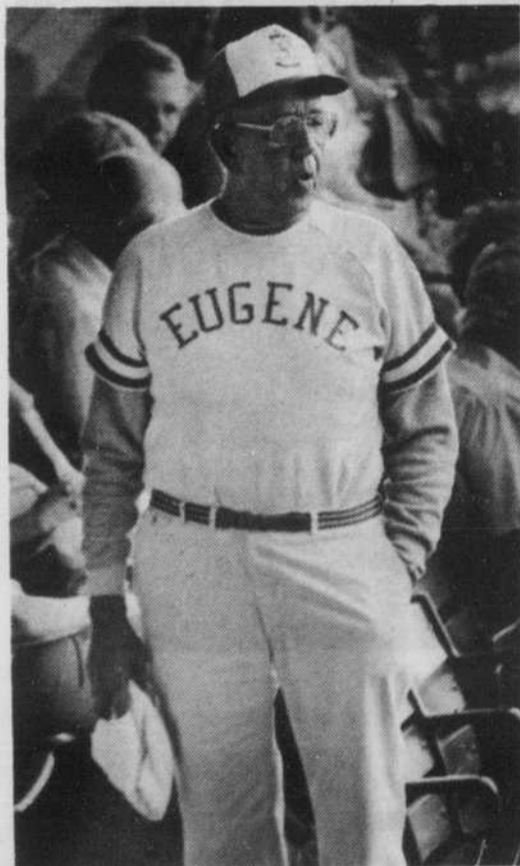
What crowd has arrived at 7:15 p.m. is scattered sparsely throughout the blood-red and electric-blue grandstand, known officially as the Eugene Public Schools Civic Stadium.

The Eugene Public Schools haven't spent a lot of time here since 1968, though. While local high-school and American Legion teams hit a ball around the park every now and again, the Eugene Emeralds of the Class A Northwest League are the kings of Civic Stadium.

Now, 15 minutes before the opening pitch, more than a thousand faithful are scattered throughout the grandstand. They munch nachos and hot dogs, and wash them down with RC, Bud or Coors (depending on the individual's age, taste and/or socio-political leaning.)

They seem laid-back, almost to the point of lethargy. There is little discernible crowd reaction as Bruce Morton announces starting lineups. Tonight's opponent: the Bend Phillies.

Morton, now in his third season as the Emeralds' park announcer, turns from a polite rundown of the Bend lineup to a rollicking introduction for the Emeralds. Spanish surnames roll off his tongue with rolling r's and other inflections that befit a World War II-era radiocaster in-



The Emeralds' reserved section usher Pete Peters blames the team's poor record on the players' youth.

roducing a Latin dance orchestra.

By day, Morton is news director for KEED radio. He calls his Emeralds job "a nice release at the end of a long news day."

Attraction is more than the game

In the booth to Morton's right can be found a contrasting picture. For Pat O'Connell of Bend's KPRB-FM, this is a job as well as an adventure. O'Connell runs the show himself, including play-by-play and statistics, for the whole nine innings. No one else in the press box pays him much mind.

No one but Sandy Douglas, that is. Douglas is a press box attendant — "a go-fer," she says. She is on hand to run errands for the press row gang. She brings food and drink, the names of umpires and players not listed on game rosters and a touch of big-city efficiency and comfort to the press box.

Douglas, a City of Springfield employee and mother of two, enjoys the job and contact with Emeralds fans. "I might make this a career," she says. "I don't know much about the finer points of baseball, but I enjoy the game... the atmosphere... the regulars who come game after game. And it's good exercise, besides."

A fan approaches Douglas with a message: there is a Porsche in the parking lot with lights aglow. Douglas relays the message to Morton who relays it to a chuckling audience. "If they can afford a Porsche, they can afford a dead battery," grunts one fan.

Meanwhile, the game has begun, before a somewhat larger but still pretty quiet crowd. One lone and feeble "boo" greets the first Bend batter to approach the plate.

Three batters later, a slick-fingered Phillie lets go of the bat as he swings. The bat goes flying into the Bend dugout, scattering players and coaches. The incident incites the most vocal reaction so far from the fans.

That flying bat was just what the doctor ordered to wake these folks up. The crowd at last comes alive, and from this point on it seems like more of a ball game.

Hawkers circulate throughout the stands peddling munchies and beverages. Among them are two young men in Eugene baseball jerseys, selling cans of beer from small ice-filled garbage cans. "Coldest brew in town," says Roger Blakeley as he pours the customer's Oly into a plastic cup (cans, after all, make good projectiles late in a ball game).

Blakeley is a Leisure Studies major at the University. This job is his way of earning a few bucks and learning about professional sports concessions from the ground up. He buys his wares from the ball club and keeps what he earns in the grandstands.

"I'll work 31 days this season and average about 20 bucks a night," Blakeley says. "On some nights I'll see as much as \$60. It's a good learning experience."

Three-and-a-half innings have passed. The Phillies have rolled up a 9-2 lead over the Emeralds. One box-seat fan knows why: "(The Emeralds) can't get the ball from the outfield to the bases quick enough."

Another one projects, "They can't get any worse — only better."

Pete Peters, an usher in the reserved section behind home plate, rationalizes the Emeralds' poor showing thus far in the season. "Those boys are young, and they've got the jitters," he explains. "That boy on third base (Luis DeLos Santos) is only 17 years old."

"I'd rather see this age group (16-19) play than any other," says Peters, a former high school and Eugene Sports Program coach. "These boys are bound to get better this season."

Many fans seem willing to wait until



Beer hawker Roger Blakeley pours out another cool one for two thirsty fans. Blakeley packs his beer around the grandstand in a small ice-filled garbage can to insure fans of the "coldest brew in town."

later in the season to see it happen. Tonight's announced attendance: 1,064.

A thundering roar, from human diaphragms and pounding feet on steel, emerges from just above the visitors' dugout. Morton has just announced the presence of a team from the Overtime Tavern that played a pregame benefit exhibition, for the Eugene Sports Program, against a team of KZEL-FM disc jockeys.

"We won 15-1, or something like that," chuckles a burly Overtimer. "We quit keepin' track at about that point. Besides, it was all for a good cause."

Emerald catcher Lou Fuentes raps a grand slam homer in the bottom of the fifth inning to give Eugene what will turn out to be its final run of the night. But the crowd briefly senses a turning point in the contest. "Home run, home run," the Overtimers chant the next time Fuentes approaches the plate. "Take a pea shooter and wake up the ump," shouts an elderly man.

The big late-game excitement comes when the McDonald's "Strike-O" contest board is hauled onto the infield. Little Kimberly Mokros, 2 years old, is given a chance to win a free Mcburger by pitching a softball through the 'O' from about two feet away. Overwhelmed by the challenge, a teen-ager coaxing her from inside the 'O' and 1,064 other people shouting encouragement, Kimberly freezes up. Finally, after a preteen boy shows her how its done, Kimberly decides to give the game a shot. Her first

try falls short.

"Give her another chance," yells the crowd. Kimberly gets another chance. The ball hits its mark. The crowd roars. Kimberly leaps about ecstatically.

Proud daddy Steve Mokros explained, "She couldn't figure out why that guy was yelling at her. She got shy."

Kim had no comment.

That might well sum up the final innings of the game. Bend rolls off three runs in the top of the ninth. The crowd begins filing toward the exits. Yet, there is surprisingly little acrimony toward the Emeralds from the crowd.

Jacobson, who grew up here and remembers seeing Greg Luzinski and Mike Schmidt suit up in Emerald green, says, "It's the only game in town. People like to come out, especially on beer nights, get ripped and watch good baseball."

Family man Mokros had a more sedate explanation. "For the money, the amount of entertainment you get is good. On a warm summer evening, it's good to get out and watch the national sport."

Civic Stadium is strictly small-time compared to Chavez Ravine or the Astrodome. But for many of the 18 men on the field, it's the first step toward the big leagues. And the 1,064 who came out tonight — early or late — got a real bargain for the cost of admission.

No, it wasn't a stellar performance by the Emeralds tonight. But the season is still young. The Mets bounced back in '69, all the way to the top if you recall. The Emeralds really didn't look piad — Bend just looked awful good.

The season's still young, though. Like the Mets of old, the Emeralds may well be the NWL "Boys of October." Time, and practice, will tell.

As Tim Jacobson says, it's the only game in town.

Photos by Michael Clapp
Story by Mike Sims

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