

TEARS AT BASEBALL’S SHRINE

Cooperstown stirs emotions for dad of young baseball player

By LARRY LAGE
Associated Press

COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. — Two places have triggered tears of joy in my life: The Vatican and Cooperstown.

I wasn’t surprised when it happened in my mother’s homeland while kneeling and praying in St. Peters as the nephew of a Roman Catholic priest and the great nephew of a Dominican nun.

Even though I’m an emotional Italian-American, I did not expect to have my emotions tugged as they were last month in upstate New York.

We were going to Cooperstown, naturally, for baseball.

I found out over the course of a week there’s much more to the one-stoplight village than its No. 1 attraction, the National Baseball Hall of Fame, which is truly a great shrine for the game.

My son plays for a 12 years old-and-under travel baseball team, Michigan Blue Jays Treat, that wrapped up its season at Cooperstown Dreams Park. The sprawling and spectacular 165-acre facility is surrounded by lush forests providing a picturesque backdrop on any one of 20-plus fields enclosed by green, eight-foot walls.

Cooperstown Dream Park host 13 week-long tournaments each summer and draws the country’s best travel baseball teams from as far away as Hawaii. It brings in more than 500,000 visitors to a village with fewer than 2,000 year-round residents.

The tournament has created a unique culture in which it is common for an infielder to extend a hand for a competitor to slap when rounding the bases after clearing the fences in a ballpark where a 200-foot fly is a home run.

When I saw that the first time, it touched me, and that’s tough to do at a sporting event for a sports writer who has been to thousands of games.

The tears flowed, though, on another day when walking to the National Baseball Hall of Fame on Main Street, which looks like a Norman Rockwell painting.

It took some time for me to pull it together before joining our team’s players, coaches, parents and siblings for a wonderfully informative 30-minute talk with Baseball Hall of Fame director of communications Craig Muder.

Even if you don’t have a player to root for at Cooperstown Dreams Park, check out a game if you can make it there before the end of the month or any other summer.

It’ll give you a good excuse to check out a place unlike any other. Locals say they love the fall when the leaves are changing colors on countless trees and crowds are smaller, so that may be a great time



Baseball greats Babe Ruth, left, and Ted Williams are depicted at bat, in statues at the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y.



An exhibition baseball game is played at Doubleday Field in downtown Cooperstown, N.Y., near the National Baseball Hall of Fame on Sept. 25, 2014.



In this June 12, 1939 file photo, these baseball stars were pictured as they attended the dedication and their induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. Front row; Eddie Collins, Babe Ruth, Connie Mack, Cy Young; Rear row left to right; Hans Wagner, Grover Cleveland Alexander, Tris Speaker, Napoleon Lajoie, George Sisler and Walter Johnson.

to get away to this gem.

GETTING THERE: If it’s too far to drive, fly to Albany, Binghamton or Syracuse and rent a car for a 90-minute drive to Cooperstown.

WHERE TO STAY: We rented a spacious home with a spectacular view of forests with trees so clumped together they looked like broccoli florets, a pool and an awe-

some deck.

Bed-and-breakfast options include the Landmark Inn where guests can help themselves to peanuts and Cracker Jack, a nod to the song “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” Near the stop light, the Inn at Cooperstown serves iced tea, lemonade and cookies on the porch.

To accommodate the seasonal floods of people, there are

also many hotels, including some nationally known ones, and motels along with homes from lakefront homes to simple cabins for rent.

WHERE TO EAT: Main Street is filled with dining options, including the can’t-miss Nicoletta’s Italian Cafe along with Sal’s Pizzeria and Cooperstown Diner. Please do yourself a favor and make a 5-minute drive north of downtown, to eat

and or drink at The Blue Mingo Grill. The restaurant is in a boatyard on 9-mile-long Otsego Lake and serves perhaps the best chowder west of New England.

MORE THAN BASEBALL: Two museums perched on waterfront property once owned by author James Fenimore Cooper, who wrote “The Leatherstocking Tales” series, are also popular attractions. The Fenimore Art Museum has a highly regarded Native American collection and the Farmers’ Museum puts visitors on an active farm.

AMERICA’S TEST KITCHEN

Make taco night into an easy one-dish meal

Our spicy beef taco bake packs all the great texture and flavor of taco night into an easy one-dish meal that could easily be prepped ahead of time.

We used 93 percent lean ground beef instead of the usual 90 percent because we found that excess grease pooled on the bottom of the dish if stored overnight.

We flavored the beef with onion, garlic, chili powder, and oregano, blooming the seasonings in oil to bring out their complex flavors. Both the chili powder and some Ro-tel tomatoes gave this dish multilayered heat. Layers of Colby Jack cheese helped to bind the beans and the meat. Taco shells broken into pieces and even more cheese made the perfect topping.

If you can’t find Ro-tel tomatoes, substitute one 14.5-ounce can diced tomatoes, drained, and one 4-ounce can chopped green chilies, drained, reserving 6 tablespoons of the tomato juice and 2 tablespoons of the chili juice. Colby jack cheese is also known as CoJack; if unavailable, substitute Monterey jack cheese. Be sure to buy 93 percent lean ground beef or the finished casserole will be too greasy. Serve with sour cream, chopped red onion, shredded lettuce, and/or salsa.



Spicy beef taco bake, which appears in “The Complete Make-Ahead Cookbook.”

SPICY BEEF TACO BAKE

- Servings: 6**
Start to finish: 50 minutes (40 minutes active)
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
 - 1 onion, chopped fine
 - Salt and pepper
 - 3 tablespoons chili powder
 - 4 garlic cloves, minced
 - 2 teaspoons minced fresh oregano or 1/2 teaspoon dried
 - 1 1/2 pounds 93 percent lean ground beef
 - 2 (10-ounce) cans Ro-tel Diced Tomatoes & Green Chilies, drained with 1/2 cup juice reserved
 - 2 teaspoons cider vinegar
 - 1 teaspoon packed brown sugar
 - 1 (16-ounce) can refried beans
 - 1/4 cup minced fresh cilantro
 - 6 ounces colby jack cheese, shredded (1 1/2 cups)
 - 12 taco shells, broken into 1-inch pieces
 - 2 scallions, sliced thin
- Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 400 F. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and 1/2 teaspoon salt and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in chili powder, garlic, and oregano and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add ground beef and cook, breaking up meat with wooden spoon, until no longer pink, 3 to 5 minutes.
- Stir in half of tomatoes, reserved tomato juice, vinegar, and sugar. Bring to simmer and cook until mixture is very thick, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste.
- Meanwhile, combine remaining tomatoes, refried beans, and cilantro and spread evenly into 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Sprinkle 1/2 cup colby jack over the top. Spread beef mixture into baking dish and sprinkle with 1/2 cup colby jack. Scatter taco shell pieces over top, then sprinkle with remaining 1/2 cup colby jack.
- Bake until filling is bubbling and top is spotty brown, about 10 minutes. Let casserole cool slightly, sprinkle with scallions, and serve.