

Take me out to the ballgame, any game



SAM BARBEE
FROM THE SIDELINES
Sports reporter

Sometimes, you just need to get out of the house. That was how East Oregonian sports reporter Erik Skopil and I felt this past weekend. So we decided to go to Walla Walla and check it out.

Walla Walla is a cool little town with a population of around 30,000. It's home to former NFL quarterback Drew Bledsoe, as well as top-notch wineries and the Walla Walla Sweets, a collegiate summer baseball team playing in the West Coast League. For two summers when I was in college, I interned for a WCL team in Longview called the Cowlitz Black Bears and knew the baseball and times were good. So, seeing a light pole banner in downtown Walla Walla, I convinced Erik we should attend this game. I checked the online schedule and, sure enough, the Sweets were playing the Wenatchee Apple Sox. We didn't know what we were going to do that day. Now we knew.

Now, this would be the first baseball game I've attended all year that I wasn't covering. That's not really a complaint, since I enjoy watching America's pastime, but it's a different experience. I don't have to bother with following counts and seeing who made what play and to whom they threw the ball. It makes rundowns fun to watch and not torturous to follow.

We figured out where the stadium was, and it included a 20-minute walk, not bad considering how hot it was and how out of shape I am. It took us just about an hour because we missed our turn. I was in charge of navigation, so it was my fault. I'll take the heat.

Eventually, we made it close enough to the stadium that we could hear the public address announcer, and got closer still that we could follow the crowd. There was a good turnout for the season-opener for the Sweets and a line had formed at the ticket booth. We joined with our \$7 ready for general admission tickets, but shortly thereafter a woman approached us and offered us two for free. We accepted and went in, thinking we had just lucked out in a big way.

We found some seats — rather high because we both like to see stuff develop, we are reporters after all — and looked forward to the beginning of the game. But there were some interesting aspects that we noticed, but couldn't quite figure out.

The first thing I noticed was the uniforms. One team was wearing red camouflaged T-shirts with grey pants, and the other team was wearing blue camo shirts with grey pants. My experience in the WCL told me that no two teams have uniforms close to being similar, so I was confused. The second strange thing was the PA announcer recognizing the umpires for "donating their time." At that point, we didn't know what was happening.

It turns out we had stumbled across not the Sweets' season-opener, but Walla Walla Law Enforcement versus Walla Walla Fire and First Responders. I suddenly realized I had been looking at June's schedule before, not May's. It was a community fundraiser game. It's an annual thing, as Erik overheard a conversation about the police winning last year. I can say with absolute certainty we were the only ones in the ballpark who didn't know what was happening. It was pretty serious, too. Players were obviously competitive, and fans would voice their pleasure or displeasure based on what they saw.

So we watched the game with smiles. Erik did some heckling in jest and soaked in the baseball. The quality of the ball was better than either of us expected, but Erik turned to me in about the fourth inning and said, "You know, if I had paid seven bucks for this, I wouldn't have been very happy."

It was a joke, but I felt the same way. That isn't to detract from what we walked into, but we really wanted to watch some high-level collegiate players do their thing.

The game worked its way along, and the police took a 5-3 lead behind some good pitching, but Erik and I left after the seventh to watch the Mariners lose at a bar we both like.

It was a pretty funny day, that we decided to go to Walla Walla Friday night, thought it was a Sweets game, only to be "disappointed" it wasn't. We had a brief conversation with a woman afterwards about our expectations and she laughed. Not at us, but at our misinterpretation of what we saw.

Although we didn't get to do exactly what we wanted, we got out of the house and had a good time. Sometimes, that's all that matters.

— Sam Barbee is the Hermiston Herald sports reporter. He can be reached at sbarbee@hermistonherald.com

Broken and rebuilt on the field of play



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Hermiston High School junior Andre Allison holds up a first place trophy from the Spokane Youth Lacrosse LAXFest May 16-17. Allison turned to coaching after his athletic career was ended with a severe back injury.



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Before he was coaching youth lacrosse, Hermiston's Andre Allison was a good player in his own right. But he suffered a severe back injury in eighth grade, and, after a long healing process, turned to coaching 'as therapy.'

Andre Allison carves out new identity after old one broke his back

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

Hermiston's Andre Allison didn't know who he was.

He was 13 years old in 2012, nursing a broken back and enduring his first full year without sports. He was depressed, his former self a distant memory.

But the thing that abandoned him — sports — also rescued him.

THE FALL

Allison was a good athlete. By his eighth-grade lacrosse season, he had earned the nickname "The Beast" because of his size and athletic ability. Opposing teams looked down the sidelines and saw the bulky Allison ready to dominate the game, and they would shutter. He was a standout in football, too, holding his own at the line of scrimmage.

But all this athletic success hampered Allison, and he's the first one to admit it. It hampered him socially, however, not physically.

"I was kind of cocky and mean in high school when I was playing sports," he said. "You know, 'Sports is life, I'm the best.' I thought I was it. I thought I was going to get scholarships, go to college, play football and

lacrosse."

That eighth-grade season proved to be Allison's last. He fractured the L5 vertebra in his spine when an opponent checked his back, cracking the vertebra slightly. Right away, the pain sensors in his body fired down into his hips and legs. He thought that was where the problem was, not the cracked vertebra. Doctors were concerned about appendicitis or other internal problems, but the back and spine were left unchecked. So Allison continued to play. A few months later, fall camp began for football, and Allison was set to enter the high school program as a freshman. Early in camp, it became obvious his back was in trouble. He hurt it again.

His mother, DiAna, took him to the hospital. "He couldn't walk," she said. "It was scary."

Allison was diagnosed with a double fracture in the L5, and both were broken all the way through. The doctor gave Allison the worst news possible. When he walked in, Allison asked, "How long will I be out, doc?" with full optimism and enthusiasm that it might be a few weeks or a month or two at most. The word that followed broke Allison's heart: "Forever."

"Right away, it was just in slow motion," Allison said. "It was like, 'This isn't happening right now.' I was such a young kid. I'm still

SEE ALLISON/A7

Youth lacrosse popularity growing

'New' spring sport gains participants, followers

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

In recent years, the Hermiston Youth Lacrosse program has been growing at an exponential rate. Just two short years ago, Hermiston teams routinely had fewer than 11 players, the number needed to field a full team, they and had to borrow players from other teams.

Now, they are now top placers at tournaments, highlighted by the third- and fourth-grade team winning a large tournament in Spokane where they were the only team from Oregon in attendance.

Why has lacrosse become so popular? What is it threatening baseball and softball as the chief traditional spring sports?

Some of it has to do with the game itself. Base sports are notorious for their slow nature, while lacrosse is fast-paced. For Hermiston resident Brooke Palzinski, lacrosse's speed is what attracted her

"high-energy" daughters.

When one played softball, she would cheer and congratulate opposing batters when they reached base "because she had someone to talk to."

"Lacrosse is constant action, constant running, and it has a much more team feel, lacrosse does," Palzinski said. "I think baseball still (is) if I strike out, if I just got the hit, if I make the catch. Lacrosse is much more team-oriented, and you're much more invested in the people you're playing with."

Echo resident BeAnne

SEE LACROSSE/A7

Coffin leaving Stanfield

After one year as Stanfield's head football coach and athletic director, Dominique Coffin is heading back to Washington. Travis Reeser, formerly of Sunridge Middle School in Pendleton, has been hired as the new physical education/health teacher and athletic director, filling two of Coffin's vacated positions, the school district announced.

Ledbetter becomes a Penguin

Hermiston pitcher signs with coach she met as a 14-year-old

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

When Madisen Ledbetter was 14 years old, she met a coach that she really wanted to play for. It was Mandy Hill, and she was then a student teacher at a clinic Ledbetter attended. She knew then that Hill was a coach that she wanted to learn from.

Four years later, that wish was granted. Hill took a job at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington, and that's where Ledbetter is headed, too. She signed her letter of intent Monday to join the Penguins softball program under Hill.

"Mandy wanted me to

SEE LEDBETTER/A7



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Surrounded by her family, Hermiston senior Madisen Ledbetter holds up her letter of intent to play softball at Vancouver, Washington's Clark College next spring.

GO SEE IT

Wednesday, June 3

Baseball
Hermiston Little League games starting at 5:30 p.m.

Thursday, June 4

Baseball
Hermiston Little League games starting at 5 p.m.

Friday, June 5

Golf
Big River GC closed for Meadowood Springs Fundraiser Tournament
Baseball
Hermiston Little League games starting at 5 p.m.

Saturday, June 6

Golf
Big River GC closed for Meadowood Springs Fundraiser Tournament

er Tournament

Sunday, June 7

Golf
Big River GC closed for Meadowood Springs Fundraiser Tournament

If you have any other local sports events, contact Sam Barbee at sbarbee@hermistonherald.com