Baseball dreams begin anew tonight



Henry Jones, 4, is ready for the Greenville Drive baseball season to begin.



HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Katelyn Pittman, 14, gets autographs from Kyle Stroup, left, and Jordan Flasher, center, during a fan appreciation dinner with the 2011 Greenville Drive at Fluor Field on Wednesday.

Crack of a bat, ballpark snacks — spring arrives

By Eric Connor
STAFF WRITER
econnor@greenvilleonline.com

The ping of baseball bats has reverberated for weeks now.

It's a familiar sound — one that rings from rec fields as the kindergartners manage to clear the tee and get a solid bat on the ball, on to middle school and high school and into the in-state college rivalries that Fluor Field has hosted over the past month.

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But tonight, a new tone will fill the air in downtown Greenville.

The crack of the wooden bats.

The sound of the fledgling pros.

Drive back in action

■ Watch the Greenville Drive arrive in Greenville at GreenvilleOnline.com. There you also can see a gallery of images from the fan appreciation dinner on Wednesday night. The Drive season opener is tonight at Fluor Field. Story, Page 1C

The arrival of Greenville Drive baseball has become a rite — both for the players who have just recently stepped off a bus into an unfamiliar city eager to prove themselves and for the fans who await the warmth of the night lights as a deliverance from winter.

"It's just a love affair with baseball," said Jim Hartwig, a 64-year-old Drive season-ticket holder who got hooked on

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GAME

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the sport when as a kid in Milwaukee he rang Hank Aaron's doorbell and convinced him to let him cut his grass.

The Drive players are entering at the A level of professional baseball, where success here means a chance to fulfill the ultimate dream: playing for the Boston Red Sox.

They get their chance, starting anew.

"You get to see some of the ball players grow," Hartwig said. "You get the atmosphere, the spring in the air. Everybody starts from square one. It's just like life — you just get a new start in everything."

The buds on the trees mark the time of year when, Rick Connolly said, his wife looks forward to the Farmer's Market opening downtown and when he looks forward to hearing the pop of the leather glove.

The sound of a crowd humming — and heckling — provides a lesson for players who must acclimate themselves to the rigors of being a pro and riding a bus from town to town over the course of a six-month season.



HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Reedy, the Greenville Drive mascot, sits with Kim Roy, left, her daughters Isabelle, 6, and Eliza, 4, and husband Alex, during a fan appreciation dinner on Wednesday.

"We're able to watch guys learn to be professionals," said Connolly, who hasn't missed a Drive game since 2007. "They're learning from us as much as we're learning from them."

The fresh start is a welcome one for 21-year-old pitcher Kyle Stroup.

In 2008, Stroup said he was the Major League Baseball draft's so-called "Mr. Irrelevant" — selected in the 50th round as player number 1,504 out of high school.

In his first year, the 6'4", 280-pound flamethrower was told he needed work to get in shape. Last year, he followed through, but tore his ACL knee ligament his first time out.

"None of that matters now," Stroup said, as the grounds crew prepared the pristine grass and infield dirt. "Everybody gets the same chance."

Tonight, Stroup will soak in the night lights and watch as perhaps at least one ball soars over the replica Green Monster in left field. Then Friday, he said, comes his chance to start on the mound.

It all began in Lake Villa recreation baseball, in a Chicago suburb, where running the bases the right direction can be the measure of success.

The Lake Villa Giants.

"When I was 5, this is what I wanted to do," Stroup said. "I'm so blessed to be here. Growing up, wanting to do this, then actually getting to — it's surreal. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Tonight will be 21-year-old Lucas LeBlanc's first game in the confines of a pro stadium.

The New Orleans native played junior-college ball at Delgado Community College before this year's spring training, where his goal was to make a pro team. Now, LeBlanc said, "the butterflies will come in" when the lights turn on.

For the record, the outfielder first donned the yellow and purple of the Tigers of Lockport Recreation T-ball.

Things have changed — but in many ways the remnants of what makes baseball a part of the American fabric remain, LeBlanc said.

"Playing the game was more about hanging out with friends and getting out of the house," LeBlanc said. "It's still fun now ... but at this level, you've got to be professional. You can't go back and kick back like you did in the younger days."

But, he said, "At the end of the day, you're coming out to play a game. You can't beat it."