

## **Play Ball**

Prince William's Yankees, Fans Swing Back Into Action

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By Peter Pae

With one hand in his back pocket, Prince William Yankees Manager Wally Moon stamped from third base to home plate and began an angry conversation with the umpire, his hand now out of the pocket and waving in the air.

"Way to go, Wally!" one fan yelled. "Go get'em!" yelled another, as boos echoed in the stadium.

It was only the first inning of the first game of a double-header Sunday afternoon, and already Moon was irate.

"The ump was saying that there was an unwritten code about how a batter couldn't turn around and look at the catcher's signals," Moon said as he spat out a wad of chewed tobacco. "Well, I told him what I thought about that."

And with that the annual spring ritual of baseball, complete with hot dogs and old-fashioned heckling, began last weekend at Prince William County Stadium, near Dale City.

"I love it," said Michael Yankiver, a native of the Bronx and now a Woodbridge resident who had brought his wife and two children to the game. "It reminds me of the Polo Grounds," he said, referring to the former Bronx home of the New York Mets and the former New York Giants.

"It was a beautiful day and we weren't doing anything, so I called up and found out there was a double-header today," Yankiver said.

It was a nice day for the Yankees too, who came back from three runs down in the fourth inning to win the first game 4-3 against the Winston-Salem Spirits. The Yankees then won the second game 3-2, thanks to a 10th-inning home run by Gerald "Ice" Williams.

Sunday's victories, along with an 11-4 triumph on Saturday night against the Spirits, capped the best season-opening weekend in Prince William's five-year history and brought a slight smile to Moon's face as the team practiced Monday.

"We have not seen enough . . . to give me a good readout," Moon said when asked how the team looked to him this year. But he added, "I'm enthused about the ball club."

So were many of the youngsters who came with their parents Sunday for the double-header pitting the two level A minor league teams in the Carolina League. In some cases it seemed the parents had tagged along with the children.

Armed with a cacophonous cowbell and a baseball glove "just in case of a pop fly," 9-year-old Rachel Horak sat next to her mother and waited for the game to begin.

"Last year a ball landed right in front of my mom. We had a fight over it, but my dad took it," said the breathless Montclair resident, who had just returned from the Yankees dugout with Yankees pitcher Royal Clayton's signature on her glove.

Although she is "not as avid as her husband and children," Pam Horak said she enjoys coming to games occasionally. The enthusiastic ringing of the cowbell by her daughter, however, "makes me embarrassed," she said.

The Yankees, a single A farm club affiliated with the New York Yankees, did not start well in the first game, prompting a perceptive 2 1/2-year-old, Anthony Joseph Miano, to comment: "They weren't looking good."

The Yankees pitcher had allowed two runs in the first two innings by walking four batters and allowing one hit.

But that was not all Miano criticized. Echoing some fans in the stand, the Lake Ridge resident blasted the singer of the national anthem. "I got scared of the singing," said Miano, who was accompanied by his father.

The majority of the 1,800 fans who showed up Sunday didn't seem to mind the singing, opting instead to concentrate on eating hot dogs, drinking beer and attempting to do the "wave," although there were large pockets of empty seats in the 6,000-seat stadium. Spectators create a "wave" when they rise from their seats on a row-by-row basis, forming a ripple effect in the stadium.

A crowd in one section of the stadium was undaunted, however, and rose up simultaneously with arms raised, letting out a scream to try to incite others. Some followed in other sections. Most did not.

About 105,000 people attended 70 home games last year, said Lesa Senker, the club's spokeswoman. She said the club hopes attendance will increase to 200,000 for this year's 70-game home schedule. "We scheduled a lot of promotional nights," she said.

"The popularity of minor league baseball is on the rise," said Jeffrey Mercer, the club's general manager. "Twenty million people last year came out to the minor league games." There are 175 clubs in the nation, he said.

Like many minor league teams that function on a skeleton crew, a few core people run the Yankees' operation.

When Prince Willie, the Yankees' mascot, dressed in a Yankees uniform and sporting a bigger-than-life face, got his moustache tangled in a string, Business Manager Carrie Follin came to the rescue.

"We sometimes have to do everything," Follin said.

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