"Another View"

Op-Ed essays

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Midsummer fun with Pigs in the park

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CENTER VALLEY  – With baseball’s annual All-Star game this week, the seasonal pause affords us the opportunity to ponder the play of America’s pastime. Major Leaguers will show off their prowess in Yankee Stadium, but here in the Lehigh Valley we have our own games to celebrate.

The Morning Call recently published its mid-year review of the IronPigs’ inaugural season. While that article evaluated the on-field accomplishments (despite the team’s initial futility), the experience at Coca-Cola Park transcends wins and losses. How has the organization fared from a fan’s point of view?

The commute to and from the park may have been a nightmare early in the season, but the procedures for shepherding cars for sell-out crowds now seem to work well (with the exception of the 65 minutes it took to exit the park from a day game). A walk through the lot suggests that more preferred parking passes are issued than there are spaces to park, but even those relegated to the distant lots can find a courteous escort via golf cart. That the club’s general manager can be found working the lanes of traffic or guiding school buses full of children safely across the street is a sign of welcome peculiar to the minor leagues.

Savory sensations greet the spectators immediately upon entering the park. Though a wide variety of foodstuffs can be found, the search for baseball’s quintessential “dog ‘n a beer” at our own field of dreams is frustrated by the uneven cooking quality of those fine Berks products and by the glaring absence of Pottsville’s most celebrated export. One respite from the corporately contracted suds is the unique “Pig Pen Pilsner” found at the lone Brew Works stand, where the young ladies have thankfully figured out a good system for keeping the lines moving.
With proper nourishment in hand, fans will find any seat in the park a good one, thanks to expert construction management that has provided clear sight lines throughout the venue. The imposing scoreboard chronicles the action in high-definition, but the paucity of baseball information it displays is aggravated by the electronic ads that clutter the view (at least for those of us with poor eyesight). Although the team’s play at the start of the season may guarantee a surplus at year’s end, the bottle-top fireworks still elicit a cheer.

No minor league baseball experience would be complete without some on-the-field antics. Kudos to the creative geniuses behind (and inside) the mascots, especially for Ferrous’ fine fashion (recently in uniform for Cub Scouts night) and for locating his progenitor on Father’s Day. Despite the routine, the between-innings events still rouse the fans to their feet, especially when it comes to cheering on those adorable piglets racing around the infield. And, though they may have struggled with the tarp early on, those “dancing dirt dudes” now enjoy a cult-like following.

Gimmicks aside, the real experience centers on the fans, and the perennial game they’ve come together to see. The wide-eyed wonder of little children, the sociable smiles of women young and old, the erstwhile exploits recounted by men of all ages, the cacophony of batted balls and barking vendors – these are the sights and sounds that make an evening at the park an enjoyable family outing.

IronPigs fans are learning their way. They come nattily attired in Pigs gear, for the most part (though leaving those plastic snouts in the bottom of the toy box is recommended.) As a crowd, they know when to applaud a hustling fielder and when to cajole a wild pitcher. Berating the umpires is a skill yet to be collectively honed. While everyone would benefit from a primer in baseball etiquette (one should never walk through a row, making others stand, while the inning is being played), still these spectators remain commonly courteous to fellow fans. And, despite the team’s moniker, Coca-Cola Park remains perhaps the cleanest public facility one could find – thanks in no small part to the generous service of our Boy Scouts.

Ernie Harwell, the legendary Tigers’ broadcaster, one astutely remarked about baseball that “It’s just a game – as simple as a ball and a bat, yet as complex as the American spirit it symbolizes. It’s a sport, business – and sometimes even religion.” Fortunately for the Lehigh Valley, this multiform experience of Americana can now be enjoyed in our own backyard.