

Summer with the Bruins

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Bob Steinkamp's team of college players is all about hard work and love of the game.

BY CURT McKEEVER / Lincoln Journal Star

BEATRICE — Any accountant numbed by piles of unfinished 1040EZ forms the week before taxes are due would want Bob Steinkamp to walk through the office door.

The guy earns money with his lawn and snow removal services. He's a part-time talent scout for the Seattle Mariners, gets paid for announcing Southeast Community College-Beatrice basketball games and also has a business that makes plaques and sells sports memorabilia.

And then there's Steinkamp's favorite "occupation" of the past 37 years — for which no line on his tax return is needed: Manager of the Beatrice Bruins summer baseball team.

"Me and my coaches do this for the love of the game. None of us get paid a dime — wouldn't take it," Steinkamp said.

Chances are you've never been to a Bruins game. The interest level in Steinkamp's squad of collegiate players ranks somewhere between afterthought and the excitement generated by the Gage County Fair.

The team's home park, Christiansen Field, isn't exactly on the beaten path, either.

A sign on U.S. 77 at the north edge of town directs traffic east onto Industrial Road. Still, without the new metal archway that bears the field's name, it would be easy to miss the gravel-road entrance.

Once you reach the end of the 20 mph lane, you might run into the likes of Roy Miller and Richard Baumfalk, or other volunteer retirees stationed at the admission gate. A season family pass is just \$40, but a good excuse will get you in cheaper than that.

Steinkamp was just a kid, and remembers the bulldozers clearing the way for Christiansen Field, a project that came

about when the Eagles and American Legion clubs got together and decided the town needed a nice place to play ball.

Today, the park sports a forest-green color scheme, with the wooden outfield walls surrounded by large spruces that line both banks of Indian Creek.

In addition to the aluminum grandstand and press box that sit directly behind home plate, there are three small rows of wooden bleachers along both base lines and also a covered section between third base and home plate.

Some folks also watch games from cars parked above the field on the first-base side of the backstop. But most of the vehicles in the lot belong to players.

It's June 11, and the Bruins are playing a doubleheader against the Ozark Generals, one of seven teams that play in the M.I.N.K. League. The abbreviation stands for Missouri-Iowa-Nebraska-Kansas.

On this day, there are perhaps 70 fans really into the action, and another 20 kids playing their own game on a hillside and ready to give chase to the next foul ball. One elementary school-aged youngster — looking like he could use a stir from Steinkamp's whistle-blowing mother, a fixture at the park — is sprawled out in a foldout camping chair taking a snooze not more than 20 feet from home plate.

Steinkamp notes on a good day the Bruins will draw a couple hundred spectators.

"We've got, considering the other teams in our league, as good of support as anybody," he said. "I go to Clarinda (Iowa) now. I remember when Ozzie Smith played, there'd be 500 people a night. Now there's 20 or 25."

The scene is a striking contrast to those that are played out up the road at the University of Nebraska — or at Texas, Texas A&M and other big-time baseball schools that send players to Steinkamp for the summer.

"I knew what it was going to be like because of past stories from Nebraska kids who'd played there," said Husker All-American Tony Watson, who pitched for Beatrice last summer. "It'd definitely be an adjustment if you didn't know. We always talk about how we love playing (at Nebraska) because we're used to 5,000-6,000 fans.

"But you can't worry about who's in the stands. Once you start playing, it's all serious."

In terms of player development, summer ball in Beatrice is not the same as the college season. Steinkamp rarely receives specific instructions from a coach on what a player should be emphasizing.

"We tell them when they get here we're not here to change your swing or change your mechanics — you ought to

know what you're doing," Steinkamp said. "A lot of them don't."

Judging by the fact that almost annually the Bruins qualify for the nation's top summer collegiate tournament — the National Baseball Congress World Series in Wichita, Kan. — a lot of them do.

Six of the nine position starters on Texas' 2005 national championship team spent at least one summer playing for the Bruins.

Longhorn outfielder Jordan Danks, whom Steinkamp calls the most-talented high school player he's ever coached, was in Beatrice last summer and will be back as soon as he's recovered from an ankle injury.

Alex Gordon, Nebraska's two-time All-American and the second pick in the 2005 major league draft, played for Steinkamp in 2002 and '03, and the Huskers' latest first-round pick, Joba Chamberlain, has also pitched for the Bruins.

Watson marveled at how "when Joba pitched, everyone came out."

But it's guys such as Bo Merrell, an infielder from small-town Texas by way of Seward County (Kan.) Community College, who best illustrate what the Bruins are all about.

Merrell is among the transplants sent to Beatrice by parents willing to leave them in the hands of Steinkamp and the host families he sets them up to live with.

Merrell's parents had never been to Nebraska before taking their son to Beatrice, and their first night at Christiansen Field left them with an unwanted souvenir — a foul ball that smashed the rear window of their car.

The next day, thanks to the efforts of John Dageford (whose family is Bo's summer host), the Merrells had a new window and a bit more peace of mind.

Dageford, a former president of Lincoln Little League Baseball, says the rules are simple for being a player host.

"Basically, you have a warm bed for them. You do laundry and you have a refrigerator well-stocked — because they eat a lot of food," he said.

Dageford is there to support Merrell and the Bruins when they play the Generals on the second Sunday in June. He's also cooking the hamburgers and brats that a local reporter purchased out of her own pocket — an annual treat to the home team.

“It’s (fun) building a relationship with them,” Dageford said. “It’s also kind of neat if you have a son who’s a baseball player.”

He does. Devon Dageford is headed to Cloud County (Kan.) Community College this fall to play baseball. No doubt when he gets there more people will hear about the Bruins.

By the way, the Bruins wear blue and white uniforms and swing wooden bats. The latter fact explains how Christiansen Field can get away with a center-field fence that’s just 350 feet from home plate.

Currently, the Bruins are in the middle of a 10-game swing in Alaska. It’s a trip that takes about \$13,000 out of Steinkamp’s \$20,000 budget. But it also goes a long way in helping him land the kind of quality, no-nonsense players he wants each year.

NU coach Mike Anderson — having played on summer collegiate teams in Aurora, Colo., and Ontario, Canada, during his days at Northern Colorado — knows all about the challenge Steinkamp faces.

“What I learned immediately,” Anderson said of those experiences, “was you’re going to be around a lot of guys that want to play summer beer league and you’re going to be around five or six guys who really want to work. We tell our guys, you’re there to work.”

That’s why Steinkamp’s roster always has the maximum-allowed four Huskers on it.

“What he has is a nice niche in a small town where they care about baseball,” Anderson said. “What you look for in baseball guys are guys that are in it for the kids. He’s one of those you latch onto. Great character — and he is a character.”

It’s no surprise that the Bruins get theirs from someone who was still itching to play after his college days were done and started the team by selling uniform sponsorships for \$50 apiece.

“It’s just something that happened,” Steinkamp said. “And it’s something you’d better enjoy doing or you’re crazy.”

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