

Yesteryear meets present day

Black Sox Park offers quality baseball, good fish sandwich

By Daimon Eklund

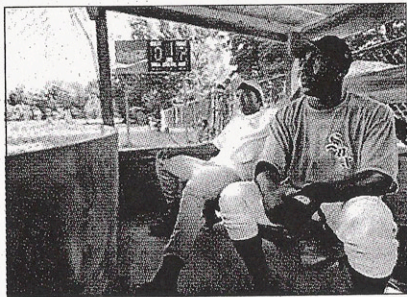
American Sports Writer
DEklund@hattiesb.gannett.com

Down in Palmer's Crossing, tucked between houses and a cow pasture, baseball's present looks a lot like its past.

At Black Sox Park, there are two sets of bleachers. On the third base side of home plate, the grandstand has a tin roof and back wall, and looks a little rickety – the wood is an aged gray, and the weather-warping has left what were once right angles askew.

On the first base side, the bleachers' lumber shows a fresh yellow underneath a coat of gray-blue paint. The newly-constructed seats are straight and true, having not seen the years of their counterpart.

Everything at Black Sox



Black Sox players Andre Poole, left, and Arthur Marshall watch the action from the dugout in Sunday's 12-0 victory over the Mount Olive Braves.

Park feels a little like those two bleachers – it's dripping with history, but there's a new life to it as well.

Watching the Black Sox play is like watching a black-and-white film clip come to life. The neighborhood, community baseball game is a national myth, an image used to evoke filtered memories of a bygone era.

But Black Sox Park isn't a symbol – it's a really good place to spend Sunday afternoon in Hattiesburg.

This Sunday afternoon, the Black Sox take on the Mount Olive Pirates. About a half hour before the scheduled 3 p.m. start, Black Sox player and first-year owner Trey Aby walks over to the backstop before taking batting practice to greet the fans.

To get to Black Sox Park, head south down U.S. 49, and take a left at another symbol of old-time Americana – the Beverly Drive-In. Follow Old

Airport Road to N. Hattiesburg Ave., where a new sign points left to Black Sox Park, about three blocks up the road.

The baseball is the centerpiece of an afternoon at the park, and it's good baseball. But what really makes the afternoon are all the other touches – a sense of history, a sense of community, and a really good fried fish sandwich.

"This place is more than baseball," Aby said. "This place is history."

Walk into Black Sox Park, and the first thing you'll see is ticket taker Tommie Thomas, who's been working Black Sox Park for some 30 years. Sitting down next to the gate will likely be Milton Barnes, who took over the Black Sox in 1948 and ran the club through last season.

Barnes built Black Sox Park, and on the center-field fence, a sign proclaims the playing surface Barnes Field. But at 87 years old, the tasks of running the

■ See BLACK SOX, 3B

Black Sox were beginning to be too much for Barnes. Enter Aby, a 31-year-old who has been playing with the Black Sox since 1991.

"I was ready to let it go," Barnes said. "I was tired of fooling with it. They'd been playing with us about 10-15 years, and he said, 'Let me buy the park.' He's done a good job with it."

Aby took over the team and park this season. Before the season started he built the new bleachers, put up a new fence and signs around the park and renovated the bathroom. He's still playing, serving as the team's designated hitter.

Before Sunday's game starts, Aby makes sure to stop and chat with Willie Stokes, as do most of the Black Sox players and fans. Stokes is another Black Sox fixture — he started playing for the team as a 14-year-old. A stroke in 1996 put the now 61-year-old in a wheelchair, but it didn't diminish his memory or love of baseball.

He'll tell you about the players that have come through Black Sox Park, or who he played against. He remembers the days when 500-600 people would regularly pack Black Sox Park. As he looks at the new signs on the fence, and the 200 or so fans in the park Sunday, he sees some of the old life returning.

"(Aby's) done a great job," Stokes said. "It's just going to take some time."

One of the things Aby's done is name John Lindsey coach. Lindsey first played for the Black Sox in 1969 and took his last at-bat in 2001.

"It's been a lot of fun, it's helped a lot of kids," Lindsey said. "Without the Black Sox, I don't know what I'd be. It was big for me, coming through high school. It was like a youth program, getting out here playing, and playing with older guys."

"The older I get, the more I like it. Baseball is life to me."

As the game starts, the stands begin to fill up. Play-by-play comes across the PA system for the "red-hot Hattiesburg Black Sox, 10-0 this season."

The Sox start red-hot, taking an 11-0 lead after four innings. Aby's sons Justin, 11, and T.J., 12, function in the dugout, retrieving bats and balls. Daughter Tanner, 9, hawks concessions in the crowd — "Do you need any refreshments?" — taking and delivering orders, which are heavy on hot dogs, the PA announcer calls "what the cold drinks and hot fish sandwiches."

Sitting at the top of the old bleachers — the better to catch a breeze coming through the gap between the roof and the back wall — is Ossie Buckley, who says he's been watching the Black Sox for 30 years, starting with his playing days.

Buckley also remembers the glory days of the park, when every seat was full.

"People quit coming, but they started coming back," Buckley said. "They'll come back. I believe they will."

There are enough people in the park Sunday that Tanner Aby is forced to turn away a few concession orders in the seventh inning — the stand runs out of bread. But a

few minutes later, she returns with news of a replenished supply.

Ronnie Lee of Hattiesburg is in the stands today for the first time in years — the 56-year-old last saw a Black Sox game as a teen-ager.

"I'll be back," Lee said. "It's enjoyable. It's fun — listening to the fans and the announcer, and the way they holler."

"There are some pretty good athletes out there."

Aby hopes a lot more area residents come to the same realization — these are some pretty good players, and they're out there because they want to be. The players aren't under contract, and they aren't paid.

Sunday, shortstop Matt Benson made his season debut with the team, just a week after he ended his career at the University of Southern Mississippi. Benson added a home run to the Black Sox's offensive barrage against Mount Olive.

"It's good fun," Benson said. "It's back to the roots of baseball, play how you want to play. And it gets crazy out here."

Where it gets craziest is in down the right-field line, past the concession stands and makeshift press box in an area called the Dog Pound.

Danny Hughes was one of the fans in the Pound Sunday.

"It's good fun, excitement," Hughes said. "It's a good place to hang out on a Sunday after church and everything."

The Sox end up with a 12-0 win, running their record to 11-0 this season. Aby finishes with two singles and a double as does Corey Jackson. Billy Fokakis Jr. belts two singles and a three-run home runs. Dane Reiter gets the pitching victory.

As the game comes to a close, Barnes says the crowd is one of the largest the park has seen in years.

Many in the crowd linger after the game ends, staying for one more conversation.

Aby is pulled in every direction at once, as he tries to simultaneously take care of all the business necessary at the end of the day, and talk to all the people coming up to say good-bye — seemingly everyone left in the park.

Aby hopes he'll be even more busy as word of the Black Sox

again spreads through Hattiesburg.

"When people realize they can come down here to a safe environment, where everything's fine, it's a good time, we'll be packed," Aby said. "We try to do a bunch of stuff with kids, too, free popsicles, things like that."

"Because that's what this is — a bunch of grown people playing a kid's game. That's all this is."