

## **A Cape League read**

By **Laurie Higgins**

Friday, June 24, 2005

On a summer evening in 1989, as Steve Weissman and his fiancée Andrea were on their way to dinner in Chatham, they discovered a baseball game and stopped to watch. Both avid baseball fans, they were so impressed with what they saw, they decided to catch a later dinner and stayed to watch their first Cape Cod Baseball League game.

In the 16 years since, Weissman married his fiancée, fathered four sons and watched a whole lot more Cape League baseball, enough in fact to write the recently-released book, "Beach Chairs and Baseball Bats: A Celebration of the Cape Cod Baseball League."

As a person who does not know a lot about either baseball or the Cape League, I approached reading and reviewing this book with a trepidation that was undeserved. Weissman has written a fascinating book as accessible to the novice as it is to the die-hard fan that will surely delight both locals and tourists equally.

A lot of the credit for this is due to Weissman's conversational writing style that is comprehensive without getting bogged down. He incorporates both his own research and observations with interviews and quotes from everyone involved in the league, from players, coaches and organizers to host families, fans and sports journalists.

The result is a lively narrative that covers every aspect of the league in fascinating detail. He explains the intricacies of the league such as how the teams are put together and how games are scheduled to accommodate issues of lighting, equality of weekend home games and opportunities for scouts to make the rounds.

Weissman includes an overview of each team and the particulars of its field like lighting and seating, as well as any special highlights. For example, the Bourne Braves play at Coady School Field, which is situated in a way that causes the glare from the setting sun to blind batters. To compensate, play is suspended for about 15 minutes on sunny days. The Harwich Mariners play at Whitehouse Field, which boasts the most complete scoreboard in the league and the Wareham Gatemen play at the Clem Spillane Field, which has the most extensive bleachers in the league.

He also touches on the human factor. As players adjust to a grueling schedule and unfamiliar weather including dense fog and cold nights, they also must adjust to the transition from standard college aluminum bats to wooden bats like the pros use. It is not always an easy transition and in some ways the manner in which a player adjusts to the hardships can be seen as a predictor of his future in the game.

The origins of the Cape League are considered to begin in 1885, although organized baseball can be traced to at least 20 year earlier. What began as an amateur summer event involving town teams has evolved over the years to become the premiere college level summer league offering spectators the chance to preview and predict the big league stars of the future.

The number of Cape League players who go on to the majors is impressive. In 2004, 197 former Cape League players were on a major league roster or on an injured reserve, representing more than 15 percent of overall players. Weissman lists all of them in the back of his book and even those who don't follow the sport will recognize names like Nomar Garciaparra and Jason Varitek.

"Beach Chairs and Baseball Bats" covers both the general and the specific of the Cape League and while much of the information in the book is the same for every season, the book also focuses on the 2004 season with player profiles and an exciting chapter that covers the highlights, great plays and disappointments of the 2004 playoffs.

Even those that don't go on to play ball with the major leagues know they have participated in something special. Although each season lasts just eight short weeks, it is a life-changing experience for the players for both the skills they learn and the friendships they form with other players and host families.

Will Rhymes, who played for the Brewster Whitecaps and hopes to get drafted to the majors says, "I feel so lucky to have been there, and so grateful for the people who gave me the chance. Every day I was there, I realized that it was probably the best day of my life, and each day I would correct myself and say, no, this is the best day of my life. I think it's rare that you can be aware at the time that you are living through the best time of your life."

Weissman is a regular contributor to "The Sports Exchange" on WATD radio in Marshfield and advises professional and amateur sports teams about fan research and marketing strategy. His enthusiasm and love of Cape League baseball is infectious.

Every year I promise myself I'm going to take time out of my busy summer schedule to take in a game or two. This year, thanks to Weissman's book, I'm really going to do it.