

A Lone Star flavor to AA All-Stars

Round Rock's Dell Diamond plays host to game filled with Texas connections

Mark Passwaters
The Battalion

Last Tuesday, the Major League All-Stars had a chance to show off their abilities to the country from Seattle's Safeco Field. On Wednesday, the best players at the AA level's Eastern, Southern and Texas leagues met at Round Rock's Dell Diamond and had an opportunity to show what they could do. The game, won by the National League 8-3, had a distinct Texas flavor.

"It's really great to be here, considering this is my first time back in Texas (for a professional season)," said Craig Kuzmic of the San Antonio Missions and a member of Texas A&M's 1998 Big 12 Champion team. "It's a lot of fun playing with the best." Kuzmic, an eighth-round pick of the Seattle Mariners in 1998, was a late addition to the American League squad.

"They told me that (about making the team) on Sunday, and I was really happy about it," he said.

When Kuzmic entered the game as a pinch hitter in the sixth inning, the public address announcer at the Dell Diamond played the Aggie War Hymn, bringing a large number of Aggies to their feet, while eliciting howls of derision from University of Texas fans. While Kuzmic may have been the person with Texas ties to draw the most attention, he was not alone. Jere-

my Fikac of Shiner, Chris Tremie and Carl Crawford of Houston, David Gibraltar of Duncanville, Richard Crosby of Bellaire and Jacques Landry of Bryan were all selected to represent their organizations in Round Rock.

"Being here in Texas, and being so close to home, it's a real honor," said Landry, a 1996 graduate of Rice and a member of Midland Rockhounds.

"It's really crazy, you hear about these guys but you don't even know what their jerseys look like, and now you're here playing with them."

Five members of the home town Round Rock Express, the Houston Astros' AA affiliate, were selected to play in front of their home fans and received rousing ovations from the crowd of 12,045.

"It's nice to be having a good year, and to be playing in such a great place," said Jason Lane, Express outfielder. "It's exciting to have the crowd behind you, and to have the other guys see what you've got every day."

"This is the best honor that I've had in baseball," said David Matranga, Round Rock second baseman. "This is a day for the fans, and we want to make sure they have some fun."

The fans were treated to an exciting game and an All-Star game record five home runs. The two biggest blows came in the National League's five-run



Bryan native Jacques Landry of the Midland Rockhounds takes a swing during the AA All-Star game, held in Round Rock last Wednesday night. The National League won the game, defeating representatives of the American League 8-3.

ANDY HANCOCK/THE BATTALION

second inning on a three-run homer by Gibraltar, the third baseman from Milwaukee's AA affiliate in Huntsville and a two-run shot by Ramon Castro, a shortstop from Greenville, the

Atlanta Braves' affiliate.

Other highlights included a mammoth 415-foot blast off the bat of former Stanford quarterback Joe Borchard, now a member of the Birmingham

Generals, the Chicago White Sox affiliate and an inning pitched by Huntsville's 20-year-old closer, Nick Neugebauer. Neugebauer retired the American League hitters in order

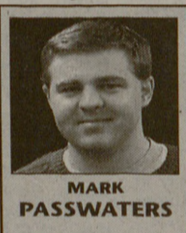
while astounding the crowd with his fastball, which was clocked at 98 miles per hour.

Pitcher Andy Pratt of the

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No conspiracy needed for a happy ending

Earnhardt Jr., Ripken Jr.'s victories good for sports, no mysterious scripting required



MARK PASSWATERS

In recent years, the American people have become more paranoid, or at least more skeptical about what goes on around them. Maybe it can be considered an "X-Files" sort of mentality. People are convinced that JFK was killed by a government conspiracy, that Aliens crashed at Roswell, N. M. in 1947 and their ships are being tested at Area 5. Some even claim that the moon landings were staged.

Many of those same people who await the United Nations invasion of the United States and are limited to three calls a day on the UFO hotline have expanded their horizons to include the world of sports. Conspiracy theorists have had a field day this past week, claiming that Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s win in

the Pepsi 400 and Cal Ripken Jr.'s home run in the All-Star Game were both fixed. These folks need to consult with their psychics and realize that sometimes happy endings occur without it being staged.

Earnhardt's win at the Pepsi 400 drew the ire of some self-proclaimed experts in the radio and print media because it came at Daytona International Speedway, the very place his father had died a few months before. In his first trip back to Daytona since his father's death, Earnhardt came from sixth places back to win while teammate Michael Waltrip held off the competition.

Tony Stewart, who is quickly becoming NASCAR's resident brat with his crude comments and dangerous driving, said he felt that Earnhardt was allowed to play fast and loose with the rules in order to set up the fairy-tale ending.

Stewart's comments may hold some

merit when considering how difficult it is to make such a dramatic run to the front of the pack in a race where restrictor plates are on the cars to limit their speeds. There are, however, more than enough points of information to prove his assertion is ludicrous. Earnhardt Jr. drives for his late father's company, DEI Industries, which has won 20 times at Daytona. They know the track and how to tune a car to win. Waltrip won the Daytona 500 the very same day Dale Earnhardt, Sr died and was at the top of the pack for this entire race. Waltrip has not been competitive on any other track this season.

NASCAR recently signed a multi-billion dollar television contract with NBC, and the Pepsi 400 was the first race shown on the network. Yes, a win for Earnhardt would have been good for ratings, but the possibility of being caught bending the rules to set up that ending would cost NASCAR far more

than it would have gained. NBC has already taken a beating from allegations that they have conspired with the NBA to get certain teams into the NBA Finals, and their reputation would be further sullied if it came to light that there was some sort of deal with NASCAR.

All of this also neglects the presence of other cars on the track. Drivers like Terry Labonte, Jeff Gordon and Rusty Wallace are not going to lay down and let another driver win a race when they are competing for a \$1 million points title. If they could have stopped Earnhardt from getting to first, they would have. To say that any driver would intentionally give up on a race and cost themselves money just because they feel bad for another driver is silly.

Allegations that Chan Ho Park grooved a pitch to retiring Baltimore Orioles third baseman Cal Ripken Jr. are similarly ridiculous. There are fewer players in all of baseball that are more competitive than Park. Two years ago, Park threw at Anaheim Angels pitcher Tim Lincecum after he attempted to lay down a bunt. Belcher took offense to Park's brushback, only to have the Dodger pitcher attack him with a flying scissors kick. This is the person baseball is going to ask to intentionally throw the ball down the middle on the first pitch he as ever thrown in an All-Star game with a worldwide audience watching? Forget it.

Park made a bad pitch, but this is only half of what happened in the at-bat. Even if he knew what was coming, Ripken would have had to do his part and hit the ball out. Ripken has struggled for most of this year, but has recently been on a tear. His 15-game hitting streak is the fourth longest of his 20-year career and he hit two home runs against the Atlanta Braves on Saturday night. Braves pitcher John Burkett gave up one of the home runs, and he certainly did not groove the pitch. After all, the Braves were playing for a chance to take over first place in the National League East.

Sometimes good pitchers make mistakes, and good hitters take advantage. Even Fox Mulder would attest to this rebuttal.

These days, there are no real incentives for a professional athlete to throw a game or not to do their level best. As Pulitzer Prize winning author David Halberstam pointed in a recent radio interview, athletes are well paid, so there is less of a reason for them to put

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Sports in Brief

Top High School QB commits to A&M

Reggie McNeal of Lufkin High School, the No. 1 high school quarterback in the state of Texas according to Dave Campbell's Texas Football, has verbally committed to Texas A&M.

McNeal picked the Aggies over Oklahoma, Arkansas, Florida State and LSU.

McNeal had his father drive him to College Station on Thursday morning, where he walked into head football coach R.C. Slocum's office and told him of his desire to attend A&M.

"I knew where I wanted to go, so I decided to just go ahead and commit," McNeal said.

"It's a good school, and I know I'll be surrounded by good people there. I also think I can come in and play my freshman year."

McNeal, who has drawn comparisons to former Virginia Tech quarterback Michael Vick, is 6-foot-3 inches tall and weighs 190 pounds.

Last year, he completed 150 of 230 passes for 2150 yards and 25 touchdowns. He also finished third in the Class 5A 100-meter dash with a time of 10.52 seconds.

McNeal is listed on ESPN's Top 100 recruits for 2002 and is ranked as the third-best player by analyst Tom Lemming in his Top 10.

A&M has also received verbal commitments from center Bob Morton of McKinney and Crockett wide receiver Tydrick Riley. Each are considered Top 10 recruits within the state of Texas.

Aggies lose Nix to Colorado Rockies

Midland shortstop Jayson Nix, considered to be this year's prized signee by the Texas A&M baseball team, has signed a professional contract with the Colorado Rockies.

Nix, the Rockies' second-round pick in the 2001 amateur draft (44th overall),

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RUBEN DELUNA/THE BATTALION