

Optimist League all-stars break in Hellman Field

By TINA HINZ, Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO --- It is totally coincidental the Major League Baseball All-Star Game was the same day metro Optimist League AAA baseball all-stars helped break in Hellman Field.

There was no attempt to replicate the Major League, said Bob Hellman, who threw the Waterloo field's first pitch about 6:20 p.m. Hellman is the founder and chairman of the board at Hellman advertising agency.

But to many of the estimated 400 fans, the inaugural event at the east side's fully equipped Hellman baseball and softball facility was just as priceless as being at the last All-Star Game at Yankee Stadium on Tuesday. The Optimist National team took on the Optimist American team.

And the crowd, despite sweltering 90-degree heat, didn't walk away disappointed.

In the bottom of the fourth inning, after two strikes, Marcus Harrington of the National team hit the first --- and only --- home run over the fence.

"He just kept swinging at these high balls," said Marcus' mom, Suzie, whose husband is an Optimist coach. "He put so much effort into it and then it was like, pow!"

She asked Hellman to sign the home run ball. Hellman, setting down half of a hot dog, wrote: "To Marcus --- Great hit 1st home run. Bob Hellman."

First baseman Marcus, 12, planned to showcase the ball among his other trophies, he said. His team won 8-5 after seven innings.

Teamwork is what has carried preparations for the ballpark's opening day, Hellman said.

His family donated \$75,000 and vowed to help raise money to complete the nearly \$250,000 project.

A six-member crew from Waterloo Leisure Services, in charge of maintaining the field, worked all day Tuesday cutting the infield grass, chalking batters' boxes, dragging the infield, and trimming along the fencing.

Two Hellman employees put up dugout roofs. A school district electrician used an extension cord to power the yet-to-be-wired scoreboard through the electrical system at the adjacent Dr. Walter Cunningham School for Excellence.

Stadium lights should be delivered next week and installed for next season, Hellman said. Restrooms and a concession stand will be constructed beyond left field also for next year.

"It's top class," Cunningham Principal Liz Crowley said. "The Hellman family took a dream and made it a reality. On behalf of the Cunningham family, a huge thank you to the entire community for pooling together to make it happen.

"As a school, what a wonderful addition to be connected with this facility," she added.

Joel Champion, 10, who played left field and catcher for the National team, noted the field has a real pitcher's mound and good pitcher's warmup area. Thick sod is also a treat after playing on older, worn terrain.

Cody Sahr, 11, who played for the American team, left a weeklong Mason City church camp just to play in the all-star game, his dad, Tim, said. Cody would catch a ride back to camp with his grandparents, Garry and Shirley Sahr of Mason City, who were also cheering in the bleachers.

Free popcorn, water and pop were offered during the game. Mount Carmel Baptist Church, 805 Adams St., sold rib, fish and polish sandwiches, burgers and pop.

Across the road, Wendell Love and his wife, Yolanda Ross, sat in their driveway with about a dozen family members and friends. Even Hellman popped by for one of Love's grilled hot dogs.

"He grabbed the hot dog off the grill with his hand (like we do)," said Love, laughing. "He didn't ask for no fork or nothing. He's one of the brothers."

The field is already bringing the community together, said Love's daughter, Diamond, who spent two years at Cunningham and will be a junior at East High this fall.

"I haven't seen this many people at my house in a long time," she said. "(The game) gets people familiar with the neighborhood."

Aaron Roberts, who used to wrestle with Wendell Love, thinks it's just a matter of time before neighborhood kids, and groups from the adjacent church and school, form a team claiming Hellman as its home field. If the field helps get kids serious about the sport, they might participate in high school, college or even major leagues.

"It'd get some kids off the streets, and they'd make good role models," Roberts said. "Maybe in return they'll do something similar to what Mr. Hellman did, like an extended library or science center."

For Hellman, who grew up about 10 blocks from the ballpark, the game brought back childhood memories. He still has a picture of the 1948 Optimist League All-Star game he pitched in.

"I didn't have a place to play ball on the east side," Hellman recalled. "I had to ride my bike to the west side."

You couldn't pick a better setting for the park, Hellman said.

"I looked at an aerial shot that caught part of Cunningham school, the ballpark and part of the church," he said. "It looked like small-town U.S.A. There's a lot of pride here."

Hellman Field will host a girls' Optimist Major League all-star game at 6 p.m. Tuesday. Events can be scheduled through the leisure services office.

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National Team's Isaiah McNamee delivers the first pitch to American's Noah Billerbeck at opening day of Hellman Field before the Optimist League All Star game Tuesday, July 15, 2008 in Waterloo, Iowa. (MATTHEW PUTNEY / Courier Photo Editor)