

Town warming up to Paducah Chiefs

By: Joshua Roberts / Source: The Paducah Sun / Posted: Saturday, November 14, 2015

Greg McKeel, general manager of the new Paducah Chiefs, said he and organizers operated on nothing more than a “leap of faith” that community members would support their efforts to resurrect the once-dormant franchise.

Turns out, based on early feedback from area residents, faith and baseball sometimes click like a flawless 4-6-3 double play.

“There’s not hardly any place I go ... somebody doesn’t come up to me and start talking about the new team and the Chiefs and how great they think it is,” McKeel said.

“Every time I get a comment from somebody — I haven’t had a negative comment from anybody yet — it makes me excited about being involved with it, about being part of something people in the community are excited about.”

Late last month, Brooks Stadium Commission representatives briefed the McCracken Fiscal Court on their plans to launch a new, wooden bat baseball team made up of college players in June 2016. The team will be named after the Chiefs, the local minor league team that disbanded in 1955.

Stadium commissioners requested a \$10,000 allocation from the fiscal court, money that would be used to buy into the Ohio Valley League. The county will oblige that funding request Nov. 23, Judge-Executive Bob Leeper said.

“It’s got full support,” Leeper said.

Meanwhile, Chiefs management has been working on putting a team on the field for what’s likely to be a 40-game schedule — half of the games at Brooks Stadium, half on the road. A good portion of the team’s 24-player roster has been locked down, the general manager said.

McKeel said the team has reached contractual agreements with 14 players and has verbal commitments with five or six others. Half of the roster, he said, will be college players who grew up in the area, bolstering community interest in the team.

“We’re optimistic that we’re going to have these players ... but you know how things go, that could change,” McKeel said.

“We’re trying to put this thing together so we cover the pitching, the catching. ... We’re down to the point now we’re having to be a little more careful that the players we get are players who fit what we need, instead of just players. We don’t want to end up with 24 catchers, 24 outfielders or whatever.”

The Chiefs are in active discussions with a candidate who will manage the team on the field and expect to make a decision soon.

The Ohio Valley League includes teams in Hopkinsville, Madisonville, Owensboro, Fulton and Dubois County, Indiana, each within a few hours drive from Paducah.

As part of the team's roster building, the Chiefs are seeking the community's help in finding homes for players.

Lenora Goode, a Brooks Stadium Commission member and the host family director, said the team needs local families who are willing to host players for the eight-week season.

"Many of you (host families) will form bonds that last a lifetime and many of (the players) will become a new family member to you," she wrote in an email.

Families that host a player will be given season tickets for the household.

"All that would be asked of you as a host family would be to have food in the fridge, a bed, a place to do laundry, and a shower," Goode wrote. "The players will provide their own transportation and any money they may need."

Anyone interested is encouraged to call her at 270-564-7996.

McKeel said the new local team is hoping to complete the roster by Thanksgiving and the new schedule by the end of the month, so it can begin selling tickets. General admission tickets are \$5 per person; chair seats cost \$10 per game, or \$8 per game as part of the season ticket package.

The team has targeted the first Saturday in June for its home opener.

Randy Morgan, a Paducah resident, released the book earlier this year, "Paducah's Native Baseball Team," which chronicles the history of local minor league baseball and the Chiefs. He remembers fondly going to games decades ago at Brooks Stadium.

Morgan, who hypothesized in his book about a possible return of minor league ball to Paducah, said the new Chiefs aren't quite what he envisioned, but he's excited by the prospect nonetheless.

"I'm glad they're doing it ... glad they're using the name, that it continues," he said.

"I think it will be successful. It's going to fill a need for baseball here in the summer. Having said that, I would still like to see us get a professional team. But I'm really happy they're doing this. And it's a good organization — the league they're going in is solid, there are good people in the league. There's no reason in the world why it shouldn't be very successful."