

BYE BYE BLATT: Royals Plat Last Game at Rosenblatt Stadium

by Brandon Vogel

As far as late summer nights at the ballpark go, this one was almost perfect. It was warm at Rosenblatt Stadium, but as the sunset got trapped in the triangles of the Desert Dome behind right field there was just enough chill to remind you that you'll soon need a sweater.

It was the first night of the high school football season in a pigskin-proud town, but 8,000 or so purists found their way into the Lego-like layers of seats.

They were there for a ball game and the ball game was a pennant race. The Royals desperately needed to beat the visiting Iowa Cubs to stay within striking distance of the first place Memphis Redbirds. Baseball teams always want to play as deeply into fall as possible, but these are special circumstances.

If the Royals can extend their season, they extend the 60-plus year history of baseball at the old ball yard on 13th Street along with it.

And that's the one thing that wasn't there last Friday night — there was no feeling that in six days baseball at Rosenblatt could be over. The fans still cheered as the Royals mounted a sixth-inning rally. They watched a "steaks race" between three guys dressed as a t-bone, a beer and an ear of corn.

They tried to throw foam baseballs into the sunroof of a pick-up provided by a local Nissan dealer. It was quintessential minor league baseball and Omaha still enjoyed it.

Maybe the wistfulness will come this Thursday, Sept. 2, at what (for now) looks like the Rosenblatt finale.

When Royals Vice President and General Manager Martie Cordaro sat down with his front office staff last August to start hashing out a season's worth of promotions, there was some debate about whether they would even bill the match-up as the "final game." The PR handbook won't tell you to take your team out of the running before the season's been played, but the team knew they were dealing with a good dose of nostalgia and emotion here as well. So "final game" it is.

"What we really wanted to be sure of was that we were being appropriate in honoring what baseball has meant to the metro area," Cordaro said.

To do that, the Royals will welcome a slew of former players, local and state government officials and a few special honorees. The first 2,500 fans in the gates will receive a miniature Rosenblatt Stadium seat. Because it's Thursday there will be the now famous \$1 beers and cokes. Because it's a farewell there will be fireworks.

As of Friday, Cordaro said the team has sold about 15,000 tickets for the game with sales picking up. But a two-week home stand has offered some fans the opportunity to get their goodbyes in early.

"We're at the tail-end of a 13-game home stand," Cordaro said. "To put that in perspective, that's almost as many home games as Nebraska football will play in two seasons. We've seen big crowds in the days leading up to the final game."

Next season the team will take up residence in a brand new stadium in Sarpy County. They also might look little different. The Royals are currently taking fan suggestions for a new team name.

Change is the only constant but there's plenty of time for the new. Thursday is all about the old. The last game is a celebration of baseball at Rosenblatt Stadium, itself a monument to a time when stadiums became synonymous with cities.

As Friday's late inning rally fell short, the second of what would be three excruciating one run losses to the Cubs, the finality of Thursday night seemed closer than it had at the start of the evening but not oppressively so. Everyone still had places to go.

The fans filed out, the teams made their way to their clubhouses and the ever present 18-wheelers continued to steam by on the Interstate behind the stadium, hauling things here or there, always moving.

The Omaha Royals take on the Round Rock Express Thursday, Sept. 2, at 7:05 p.m. at Rosenblatt Stadium. Tickets are available at oroyals.com or by calling the ticket office at 738.5100.

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