

Our Boys of Summer: The 1999 Inaugural Big Train Season

The players began to arrive at the homes of their host families the weekend before Memorial Day last spring. Our construction team was putting the finishing touches on Povich Field as the players went through their initial workouts under Big Train Manager Derek Hacopian.

Ten weeks later, the Bethesda Big Train had completed the 1999 inaugural season with a record of 37 wins, 19 losses, and 1 tie, winning the championships of the L.S. Fiore Memorial Day Tournament in Altoona, PA and our own Ledo Pizza 4th of July Capital Hardball Classic at Povich Field.

The Big Train finished second in the Clark C. Griffith Collegiate Baseball League behind the Arlington Senators which later won the championship of the All-American Amateur Baseball Association (AAABA). In early August, the Big Train finished third in the College World Series of the National Amateur Baseball Federation (NABF).

Those are the facts, but they hardly capture the richness of the experience that was Big Train baseball at Povich Field. With the Povich family on hand for a moving opening night ceremony on June 4, 1999 and visits from former Senators great Mickey Vernon and the Orioles Bird, every night at Povich Field was memorable.

An average of 500 fans came to each of the home games in June and July with a record crowd of 850 for the last regular season

game. The local community took our guys into our homes to live and also into our hopes and hearts. The kids who chased down Griffith League foul balls have priceless memories. Homer the mascot became a beloved local figure from his very first night of Big Train baseball. Win or lose, dozens of young fans would flock onto the field after the games for autographs from our summer heroes.

The Big Train got off to a fast start with six wins and a draw in exhibition games, in-



A proud Povich family on Opening Night, June 4, 1999.

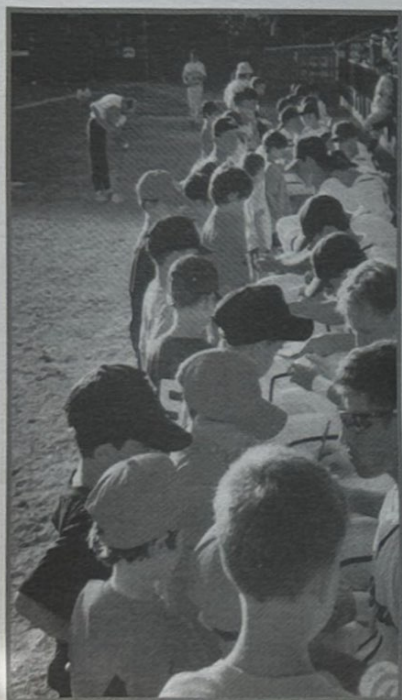
cluding a four game sweep at the L.S. Fiore Memorial Day Tournament in Altoona, PA and a win over the Front Royal Cardinals of the Shenandoah Valley League at historic Bing Crosby Stadium.

Work on Shirley Povich Field was completed seemingly minutes before Shirley's son Maury threw out the first pitch in memory of his legendary father. The capacity crowd included Mrs. Povich and dozens of proud Povich family members. The Big Train players rose to the occasion, jumping on the Arlington Senators with 5 runs in the first inning of a 7-2 victory.

The Big Train won 8 of the first 10 league games to take a 1-1/2 game lead over Arlington at the mid-point of the first round of the Griffith League. Two tough losses to the Southern Maryland Battlecats, including a 2-1 classic at Prince George's Stadium, home of the Eastern League Bowie Baysox, were the only defeats. Arlington closed the gap when Bethesda dropped two of three to the Vienna Mustangs in late June. First baseman Chuck Easter was named Griffith League Player of the Week going 9 for 23 (.391) with 4 RBI.

The Big Train lost and regained the league lead by splitting a June 23 doubleheader with Arlington at Barcroft Field. Jeff Little threw a 7-inning no hitter in the nightcap and was named Player of the Week. Big Train parents and family members came in from across the country for a weekend that included a trip to see a Yankees-Orioles game at Camden Yards. Four losses in a row at the end of June doomed the Big Train's chances to win the June round of Griffith play. Arlington beat Southern Maryland in a one game playoff.

On June 30, Povich Field hosted the First Annual Joe Branzell All-Star game with the Griffith All-Stars beating the Eddie Brooks All-Stars from Baltimore in a well played 2-1 contest in front of scouts from several major league clubs. Six Big Train players were named to the Griffith squad – pitchers Bo Acors, Jeff Little, and Kyle Sparkman and infielders Gregg Davies, Chuck Easter, and Jeff Haines. Sparkman was credited with the win, and Easter scored the first Griffith run.



July 14 autograph night at Povich Field.

Our home team broke out of its late June slump with three solid wins to capture the Ledo Pizza July 4 Capital Hardball Classic in the sizzling heat of the holiday weekend. Bo Acors struck out 14 in an 8-1 win over Youth Service of Brooklyn. Jeff Little and reliever Luke DeBold held off L.S. Fiore of Altoona, 3-2. In the championship game, pitchers Michael Pulley and Joey King led the Big Train to a 5-3 victory over the Swann Insurance team of Cambridge, Maryland. Gregg Davies went 6 for 8 with 6 RBIs and was named the tournament MVP.

Again in July, the Big Train got off to a fast start winning 5 of its first 6 league games to tie Arlington for first place in the league's second round. On July 9, more than 700 fans turned out to see the Orioles Bird and watch Cheyne Griswold knock in the winning run with two out in the bottom of the ninth for a 6-5 victory over Southern Maryland. On July 16, the Senators took command of the second round with a second come from behind 11th inning win over the Big Train at Povich Field in ten days.

More Birds came to Cabin John Regional Park on July 17 as Orioles pitcher Jason Johnson was the star attraction at a well-attended Pitch & Hit Clinic.



Big Train's best hitters, Chuck Easter and Steve Thomas.

The Big Train won 7 of the final 9 league games, but it was not enough to catch the red hot Senators. The Senators were 18 and 1 in July and won the championship of the All-American Amateur Baseball Association (AAABA) in August. A standing room only crowd of 850 jammed into Povich Field for the regular season finale, a 6-4 win over Vienna.

The Big Train faced off against Southern Maryland in a best of three series for a berth in the National Amateur Baseball Federation College World Series. 750 fans packed Povich Field on July 30 to watch a 12-7 Big Train victory. Big Train bats came alive with home runs by Jason Graham, Chad Oliva, and Chuck Easter and a base clearing 3 run triple by Jeff Mackey. Under a broiling Saturday afternoon sun at Annapolis High School, the Big Train won 8-5 behind two home runs from Graham and a three run bomb by Oliva.

The NABF World Series was played with aluminum bats at Joe Cannon Stadium in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. The very first game was a perfect advertisement for wooden bats, with the



Big Train winning a 4 hour and 20 minute aluminum bat slugfest over the Ohio Warhawks, 18-17. The Big Train rallied from a 13-6 deficit with the big blow a huge grand slam by pinch hitter Pat Cunningham. Shortstop Dan Woodley scored 5 times.

Wes Hepler was nearly perfect retiring the first 19 batters he faced in a 14-1 blowout over the Bloomington Bobcats. Casey Hildreth hit a grand slam, and Jason Graham continued his homer heroics with a three run blast. The easy Friday morning victory was followed by a brutal 8-4 loss to the Mt. Airy Sharks in a Friday night game that ended well after midnight. Steve Thomas' three run home run sparked a 9-7 win over the Michigan Rams on Saturday afternoon.

The semifinal game on Saturday night was a rematch of the final game of the July 4 Capital Hardball Classic. The scores were the same, 5-3, but this time Swann Insurance won. The loss eliminated Bethesda, and Swann defeated Mt. Airy for the title the next day.

Reflecting on the inaugural season, Big Train Manager Derek Hacopian said, "We had a great first year, and it was a team effort with every player making a contribution." Hacopian named Gregg Davies of Olney, Maryland and Towson University as Most Valuable Player for his versatility in playing outfield as well as first base and for his excellent hitting. Chuck Easter of the University of Maryland and Steve Thomas of the University of South Carolina were named Most Outstanding Hitters. Bo Acors of Virginia Commonwealth University was named Most Outstanding Pitcher.



The 1999 Inaugural Season Bethesda Big Train Team.