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# NAPA RALLY

BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARY BETH KOETH

**R**IGHT-HANDER Scott Harkin lobs a few easy balls to catcher Nicco Toni, and then ratchets up the velocity. The first player signed by the Napa Silverados, he's about to pitch the first game of the team's first season in the Pacific Association of Professional Baseball Clubs, an independent minor league in northern California. Once a hopeful in the Milwaukee Brewers organization, Harkin, now 26, lives with his grandmother and still dreams of making it to the majors. The odds may be long, but his enthusiasm hasn't dimmed. He wants to play professionally until he's 40. And he wants to be a good example for kids. Since joining the Silverados in February, he's been talking to local students about the importance of teamwork.

In the stands near first base, retired couple Cindy Irish and Vic Aissa await the start with the excitement of proud parents. They recently welcomed two of the Silverados into their home as part of the club's host family program for nonlocal players. Irish has been taking videos of her Silverados "sons" so she can send them to their mothers.

Near the first-base dugout, Mark Ibanez, the sports director of Bay Area television station KTVU, stands ready to throw out the ceremonial first pitch alongside Rep. Mike Thompson and former baseball greats Vida Blue and Bill Buckner. Ibanez brought along a camera crew for a quick spot, but he's here primarily as a fan and says he wouldn't have missed the Silverados' opener for anything—and that includes the Golden State Warriors hosting Game 1 of the NBA Finals. "I live in Napa and my wife was born and raised here," he says later. "Being here is important."

As the countdown to game time continues, Megan Castellucci takes the field and greets just about everyone by name, her heart thumping with a race-to-the-finish line feeling. The assistant

general manager, who's also an indefatigable multitasker, Castellucci is getting ready to hand a microphone to the team's owner, Bruce Johnston, so he can give a welcome speech to the 450-plus fans and sponsors. But she could be forgiven if her mind is preoccupied. Castellucci presides over the team's day-to-day business and has played a central role in everything from executing player contracts to planning in-game fan activities.

Elsewhere at the team's home field at Napa Valley College, amid blaring country music and the ballpark perfume of sizzling hot dogs, players are warming up in uniforms that still bear creases from where they were folded. Business logo banners are flapping on the outfield fences beneath the American flag. Fathers are playing catch with their sons. And the metal bleachers are filling up.

The scene may seem like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting, but it's actually the

On May 31, Ryan Cooper (previous page) and Silverados teammates T.C. Mark (27), Nick Kern (batting), and De'Andre Asbury-Heath (2) opened the team's first season in the Pacific Association of Professional Baseball Clubs, an independent minor league.

culmination of a painstaking, collective effort. After a year of preparation to launch the franchise, today's May 31 contest kicks off an 80-game schedule for the Silverados (the season runs through August), one of two expansion teams joining the 5-year-old Pacific Association, the only independent pro baseball league based on the West Coast. With teams also in San Rafael, Pittsburg, Sonoma, Vallejo, and Martinez (the other new club), the league is one of eight pro baseball leagues in North America that are independent—meaning it has no ties to Major League Baseball or its minor league affiliates. For players, independent leagues like this can be the first or last stop in professional baseball.

But the players are only part of the picture. Creating a minor league organization from scratch, at this level, is a Herculean undertaking, from the personnel to the facilities to the finances

and more. It's imbued with the hope of second chances and weighted with risks. And it requires nothing less than the full commitment of an entire community.

"Come to a game and I think you'll find out what Napa is all about," Castellucci says.

And to think that none of this would have happened if not for a broken arm.

**W**HEN Bruce Johnston, a 61-year-old shopping center developer, started his own consulting business in 2006 and moved with his wife, Jill, from San Francisco's East Bay to Napa a year later, he intended to work until retirement, at which point he'd travel and enjoy the lifestyle that comes with living in one of the world's most beautiful wine regions. But those plans were derailed in June 2016 when he tripped one night, fracturing his arm and shoulder and





Assistant general manager Megan Castellucci, owner Bruce Johnston, and manager Tito Fuentes Jr. signed a mix of young players and experienced pros. After meeting in the locker room before the opener, Josh Montelongo (top) and his teammates had a lot to cheer about.

requiring multiple surgeries.

“I couldn’t drive, travel to clients, or do much of anything but sit around, watch a lot of James Bond movies, and think,” Johnston says, laughing. “After three months of that, I realized that I didn’t miss what I had been doing.”

The epiphany made Johnston’s decision to retire easier. Once he was able to drive again, he attended networking events in hopes of connecting with civic-minded leaders and organizations, including the Napa Professional Baseball Exploratory Committee, which had been considering adding a Napa team to the Pacific Association. Intrigued—and believing that a club had already been formed—Johnston reached out with the intent of volunteering at games. The next day, he received an email response saying, “We are glad you are interested in owning the team.”

It took Johnston aback at first, but after a chat with his family, the idea sprouted wings. He wanted to bring something to Napa that didn’t exist: affordable family entertainment. In a region whose activity du jour is off-limits to kids, and where wine tasting can cost upward of \$50 per person, a \$10 baseball game ticket is about the biggest bargain around.

Though Napa is known the world over for its adjacent wine valley, the town of 80,000 has an insatiable appetite for America’s pastime. With 23 youth league teams, seven high school teams, and baseball camps galore, the sport is played nearly 10 months per year in Napa County.

“The attraction of Napa is its world-class wine and food, and that’s OK—it’s what drives our economy,” Johnston says. “But the reality is most locals can’t and don’t visit the Napa Valley the way visitors do. For visitors who want a different diversion one night, baseball is a great option.”

Responding to the email from the exploratory committee, Johnston asked for time to dig into the business model. He gave the league a nonrefundable deposit, which gave him the first right of refusal should another bidder come along.

He hit the ground running, attending Pacific Association games and taking note of their pervasive street fair vibe brought about by the carousel of between-inning games and wacky theme and appreciation nights. He also sought the advice of other team owners, including the president and general manager of the San Rafael Pacifics, Mike Shapiro.

“I learned two things right away,” Johnston says. “One, that games were about much more than just baseball, and two, that I would need significant support from the community to make this work.”

When minor league teams are affiliated with

major league franchises, the big league club pays the majority of the expenses. In independent leagues, the owner picks up the tab for everything, including player salaries.

Despite the potential load on his personal finances, something in Johnston’s gut told him to say yes. Almost one year after breaking his arm, he signed on the dotted line and became the proud owner of a baseball team. He named it the Napa Silverados after the Silverado Trail, the well-traveled road that unites communities up and down Napa Valley.

**I**N THE FALL of 2017, Johnston hired Tito Fuentes Jr. as part of his executive team. The 50-year-old, happy-go-lucky leader, whose dad played with the San Francisco Giants in the ’60s and ’70s, is never without a baseball-is-like-life affirmation at the tip of his tongue. He played minor league ball in the A’s and Los Angeles Dodgers organizations and has spent the better part of the last three decades teaching and coaching baseball to kids and young adults, a job he says he was meant to do. Though Fuentes transitioned into the role of manager before spring training, Johnston initially tasked him with securing sponsors and trade partners, who might exchange goods or services with the team.

“Obviously Tito knows baseball, but he also lives in Napa and knows the people here. Everybody loves Tito,” Johnston says.

Johnston also nabbed Castellucci, 25, who was the assistant general manager for the San Rafael Pacifics last year, the first woman in the league to hold the title. While tending to the business side of player acquisitions, she promoted the team at community events and led the effort to find families willing to open their doors to nonlocal players for the season. She also spent months thinking about the fan experience, planning between-inning games for kids such as base-stealing races and musical chairs, and scheduling themes for each of the season’s 40 home games, including Crush Night for workers in Napa’s wine industry.

Under Johnston’s leadership, Castellucci has paired each Silverados home game with a non-profit benefactor that’s invited to set up an information booth and raffle off swag. There are nights that honor firefighters, police officers, and active service members. (Johnston also has insisted that every player stay on the field after games to sign autographs for kids.)

The role Castellucci’s most proud of, however, involves getting players involved in the community, something she first worked on as a community relations intern with the A’s in 2016.



To be as fan-friendly as possible, the Silverados fill games with activities. But the team also engages the community in other ways, such as partnering with a local college on concessions.

Castellucci has accompanied players to elementary school classes and youth leagues, as well as an event supporting local veterans.

Every now and then, she steals away to work out or ride her horse, Shrimp. But overall, the job has been seven days a week since she started. To her, the cause is worthy of the time. “To be at the forefront of this in my hometown is an honor,” Castellucci says. “Our community really knows how to rally behind one another.”

Host families like Irish and Aissa are playing a critical volunteer role in housing nonlocal players—the typical player salary is \$200 a month. Four years ago, the couple bought a large Napa house with two spare bedrooms in hopes their grown sons would come to visit more often. “We have all this room and it’s so private,” Irish says. “It’s the perfect setup, and I thought being a host was the least we can do.”

“Plus, I think it’s really cool that we’re able to root for our guys,” Aissa says.

Silverados catcher T.C. Mark from Arizona and pitcher Billy Felo from Pennsylvania moved in for spring training and made the team. Although hosts aren’t required to feed players, Irish can’t help herself and plans “family” dinners.

“My fear is that they will go away after the season and I will never hear from them again,” she says. “Will they think it’s weird if I want to check in on them from time to time?”

“No way,” Mark says later when asked about that. “Cindy and Vic are the best. We will keep in touch for sure.”

**M**ONTH AFTER MONTH, Johnston, Fuentes, and Castellucci worked with Napa businesses, groups, and residents to secure funding and other support. Johnston struck a deal with Napa Valley College to use its field for home games. As part of a five-year pact finalized last fall, the Silverados agreed to pay for infrastructure improvements, including new bleachers and repairs to the PA system and lights, costing Johnston around \$150,000.

For concessions, Johnston tapped into the college’s reputable hospitality, culinary, and tourism management program, asking the school to create a game-day menu worthy of Napa’s high standards for food. Under the guidance of program coordinator and instructor Merrick McKeig, 15 spring semester students wrote and tested recipes, worked with vendors and suppliers, and built out a

The Silverados give residents an attractive option for kids entertainment. But they couldn’t do that without volunteers like Cindy Irish (far right) and Vic Aissa (blue shirt), who opened their home to T.C. Mark (red shirt) and teammate Billy Felo.

food truck called Scholar Eats, which serves as the Silverados food stand during home games and employs three students.

“It’s been really fun for us to be a part of this from the beginning, but more than that, this has given students valuable skills they can take with them when they graduate,” McKeig says. “It was essentially like starting a small business.”

Selling the vision for a team was not always easy, Johnston says. But some who were baseball lovers got it right away.

Robin Baggett, who owns Alpha Omega winery in St. Helena, donated money early on, becoming a minority partner and advisor to the team. “Baseball is the best sport to watch in person with family and friends,” says Baggett, who played semipro ball until he was 50. “I’m glad I was able to do a little to help bring professional baseball here.”

The local newspaper, the Napa Valley Register, agreed to provide the team with in-kind support in the form of advertising.

“I really wanted to help get the Silverados off the ground,” says publisher Brenda Speth, who calls herself a “baseball-is-life romantic” and keeps souvenir baseballs in her office. “My prediction is that this team is going to be a big deal

in a few years when more people find out about it. Napa is Americana and it’s a baseball town.”

More than three dozen sponsors, advertisers, and trade partners have pledged monetary and in-kind donations, totaling more than \$175,000. Every dollar counts. Johnston estimates his annual operating costs at \$200,000, and that doesn’t include the new bleachers or money spent just to start up the franchise.

A league requirement dictates that the home team feed players on both teams after each game, so Fuentes rounded up six Napa restaurants to do it all season long. Among them are Compadres Rio Grille, which also welcomed players to a dinner with their host families at the start of spring training, and Downtown Joe’s sports bar, where owner Joe Peatman hands out schedules, holds ticket giveaways, and rings a bell on game days to announce “one hour to first pitch.”

Though Johnston has logged many wins, he’s dealt with a few setbacks. The new bleachers he purchased didn’t show up on time, forcing him to use temporary seating for the season. Also, Johnston was unable to gain approval from the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control to sell beer or wine at the games. He found a

workaround that involves a series of one-day festival permits. The downside is that his planned revenue stream from this source is dammed up for now.

"I'll deal with ABC next year," he says. "Right now, I just need to make sure people can get a cold beer at the game."

**M**ARK AND FELO are just two players on the 23-member roster that Fuentes and Castellucci built over the last five months. Several were found at organized events such as a league-wide tryout in April, and through the California Winter League, the nation's premier instructional league held in Palm Springs in February, where they signed opening day pitcher Harkin.

Fuentes picked others from his vast network of managers, players, and scouts.

The latter is how Mark found his way to Napa, as did center-fielder De'Andre Asbury-Heath,

who was drafted at age 17 by the St. Louis Cardinals organization and was released last year. He wears No. 2 for the Silverados, a reference to getting a second chance. Many of his teammates find themselves in a similar position.

Mateo Fernandez, a Napa native and left-handed pitcher, hung up his glove in 2015 after playing two years for Napa Valley College. He had been painting houses and working at pizza joints the past few years. Deivy Mendez, a pitcher

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### HIKING

Surrounded by coastal mountains, Napa Valley is a primo spot for outdoor enthusiasts. At Robert Louis Stevenson State Park, a 5-mile trek up Mount St. Helena leads to a view of the valley and, on a clear day, a sight line all the way to San Francisco. At Skyline Wilderness Park, there are more than 25 miles of trails.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALLEN KHAZAN

from the Dominican Republic, was signed by the Tampa Bay Rays organization six years ago as a 16-year-old undrafted free agent but was released earlier this year. Other players, like Kai Davis (the son of former major leaguer Chili Davis), and catcher Toni (Harkin's battery mate for opening day), are getting their first taste of pro ball.

Spring training lasted eight days, with the roster eventually whittled from 42 players down to 11 pitchers, 11 position players, and a player/pitching coach, Devon Ramirez. Fuentes knew exactly what he was looking for, a strong team up the middle—catcher, shortstop, second base, and center-field. He didn't stray from that strategy when evaluating individual character, either, choosing players who were strong up the middle in another way—brain, heart, guts.

By opening day, the chemistry between Fuentes and the players seemed promising. "I have learned something valuable from every coach I have ever had, whether it's growing as a person or becoming a better player," Harkin says. "I'm sure Tito will get the best out of me, too."

While his immediate goal is to steer the team to a title this year, Fuentes feels a longer-term responsibility to his players, too. "Maybe it's because they were injured, or because they are too immature, or they made bad decisions, but these guys aren't playing higher-level ball right now for a reason," he says. "I feel it's my job to figure it out. Sometimes they just need to get out of their own way."

**I**N THE fluorescent light of the locker room, minutes before the game, Fuentes claps his hands and implores his team to listen. He's delivering his first pregame pep talk as Silverados manager.

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be,” he says. “It’s just a game like any other.”

But for the 23 sets of eyes staring back, every game is big. Moving up is a long shot. But ever the baseball philosopher, Fuentes reminds them, “Every game is a possibility.”

Players signed contracts but are free to go if a higher organization approaches the Silverados about acquiring the player.

“If our roster looks different at the end of the season than it does on opening day, then we’ve done our jobs. I’ll consider that a success,” Castellucci says.

Though he doesn’t have the exact numbers, Shapiro, the Pacifics president, guesses around 20 players have moved each year from the Pacific Association to higher levels of independent ball or to affiliated teams. Also, it’s not just players who find new opportunities. Front office staff, broadcasters, and managers on the hunt for a career in professional baseball can also cut their teeth here. Fuentes has his eyes on managing or scouting for an affiliated or major league team. Castellucci, when thinking of the future, falls back on her love of community.

“In this business, I’ve learned to never count anything out,” she says. “But I love the philanthropic side of the game, which is a part of it not a lot of people see.”

**A** 10-PERSON-DEEP line has formed at the Scholar Eats food truck, where Napa Valley College students hand over Silverados Sausages, hot dogs, and nachos from a window just above the words, “We learn, you eat,” scrolled on the side. (Later, by the sixth inning, the truck will sell out of hot dogs.)

From the field, Fuentes spots a teen who’s standing near the dugout, his fingers curled around the chain-link fence. Fuentes asks the boy, Austin, if he’d like to be the batboy for the game. “That just made his year,” says Larry Wiman, Austin’s grandfather, a retired San

Francisco train operator who now coaches youth baseball and lives in Napa.

Wiman has come for the love of the game and the company, and he’s found both.

“It’s great to be outdoors, and there’s nothing better than being around a baseball diamond,” he says. “I’ve already run into a few buddies, too.”

Before the first pitch, Johnston stands on the manicured field and starts to welcome and thank the sold-out crowd. But in a frustrating moment, the microphone fails, so Johnston has to yell.

After the game begins, Johnston is taking a breather behind the dugout and hears someone calling his name. Pitching coach Ramirez jogs over and slaps a baseball into Johnston’s right hand.

“The first-ever out by the Napa Silverados,” Ramirez says.

Johnston’s eyes look bluer behind the tears that well up in them. His knitted brow unravels, and his taut jaw loosens into a smile. He holds the ball with his fingertips as if it’s a delicate jewel.

It’s a tangible embodiment of a team and a dream, stitched together by a community. Johnston scribbles the date on the ball.

On the field, before stepping to the plate for the first time, Asbury-Heath scribbles something, too. In the dirt with his bat, he writes a letter C in honor of his grandmother Clara, who attended every game when he was a kid. It’s his way of keeping her there with him, he says, and a reminder to never give up. He smacks an RBI double, part of what will become a seven-run first inning and an eventual 12-3 win.

Johnston pauses to relish the moment, and then gets back to the urgent business of the hour. He has more people to thank for coming.

*Kimberley Lovato is a freelance writer from California who’s a sucker for a game-day hot dog. Email her at [klovato@icloud.com](mailto:klovato@icloud.com).*

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