

SENTINEL SPORTS

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Reclaiming Surf Stadium

Atlantic Cape Buccaneers give vacant venue a little life; athletes get chance to play college ball

David Nahan/Sentinel
A baseball game gets under way at a nearly empty Surf Stadium last week between the Atlantic Cape Community College Buccaneers and Brookdale Community College, the defending national community college champions.

By KYLE McCRAE
Sentinel Sports

ATLANTIC CITY — The Atlantic Cape Community College baseball team features 15 student athletes, most graduates of Cape-Atlantic League high schools.

The Buccaneers compete in Region 19 of the National Junior College Athletic Association and play their home games in Surf Stadium, also known as the Sandcastle, which used to be the home of the professional baseball team, the Atlantic City Surf.

Between games of a double-header with Brookdale Community College April 19, head coach Rodney Velardi and a few of his players spoke about the program and what it has meant to the students.

Velardi has seen the program grow in just a few short years.

"I've been here since the beginning, since they brought the team back," he said. "This is our seventh year. Coach (Jeff) Ball has been with us the last four years and every year we bring in some volunteer coaches to help out. Our

See Bucs, page B8

It's nice to hear the echoes of a baseball game in the stadium

By DAVID NAHAN
Sentinel staff

ATLANTIC CITY — At Surf Stadium on Albany Avenue, there are holes in the deteriorating scoreboard that breaks up the view of big casinos and hotels in the Atlantic City skyline.

Loose tarps flap from the outfield fence in the spring breeze. The stands that could fit 5,500 spectators are nearly vacant, the sections of blue seats and green seats faded but bright against the grey cement floors.

The covered upper deck is in shadows in the mid-day sun, offices and rooms empty, a set of payphones unused, plywood in place

of a door. The concession stand is shuttered, an empty wooden picnic table sitting where fans used to gather after during breaks in Atlantic City Surf games.

The metal gates are drawn down where the murals of baseball figures past remain vibrant on the walls near the blocked main entrance.

Most of the time the stadium sits vacant. The luster is gone and there are many places where the limited use has taken its toll. As a whole, though, the place looks solid, albeit lonely, waiting for the crowds to return. It gives the impression it would not take much to bring the whole place

See Echoes, page B9



David Nahan/Sentinel

Members of the Atlantic Cape Community College Buccaneers are, from left, in front, Chris Russ, a graduate of Cape May County Technical High School; Matthew Fazio, Middle Township High School; Hunter Tomlin, Cape May Tech; Eric Goss, Lower Cape May Regional High School; and Robert Parisi, West Orange High School; and, in back, assistant coaches Brett McCulley and Bert Rosica, Antonio Caraballo, Egg Harbor Township High School; Joseph Coughlin, Moore Catholic High School; Tyler Rzemnyk, Mainland Regional High School; Thomas Hutchison, Middle Township High School; David Sidwell, Oakcrest High School; Usiel Marmolejos, Atlantic City High School; DJ Centola, Egg Harbor Township High School; TJ Neil, Absegami High School; Shane Adams, Cape May Tech; assistant Jeff Ball, a former Surf player and GM, and head coach Rodney Velardi.



David Nahan/Sentinel
Buccaneers head coach Rodney Velardi puts down the third base line as Lower Cape May grad Eric Goss watches. At left, Goss puts down the first-base line with help from Mainland Regional grad Ty Rzemnyk. Above right, assistant coach Bert Rosica rakes the infield before last week's double-header. At right, a player sweeps out the dug-out.



Assistant coach: Play baseball while earning a college degree

By KYLE McCRAE
Sentinel Sports

ATLANTIC CITY — The Atlantic Cape Community College baseball team offers a chance for local students to continue their athletic careers while they earn their associate's degree.

"These kids are fantastic," said assistant coach Bert Rosica. "When I met them I was really impressed from the get-go."

Rosica joined head coach Rod Velardi's staff this year and has fallen in love with the program.

"Their stories are amazing to me," Rosica, the Buccaneers' catching instructor, said. "A lot of them are kids who aren't prepared to go to a four-year school academically, but they're getting there, or

maybe they're not yet ready to go to a four-year school and play baseball, but they're good ballplayers who want to develop a little more. Then they can get another crack at it.

"We (also) have kids who this is it for them," he added. "They're going to get their associate (degree) and they're going to go get a job, and that's great. Then we have others who this is a more economical route for them. A few of the kids have the choice to go anywhere they wanted to, but they just wanted to play another year or two of baseball."

The team is comprised mainly of local student athletes.

"Most of our kids are from Atlantic

See Baseball and Degree, page B9



Atlantic Cape Community College Buccaneers warm up in front of the broken scoreboard at Surf Stadium in Atlantic City last week.



David Nahan/SENTINEL

Atlantic Cape Community College players outnumbered fans early in the double-header at Surf Stadium between Atlantic Cape Community College and Brookdale. At left, Middle Township High School graduate Thomas Hutchison and teammates wait for the start of the game last week.



Baseball and a degree

Continued from B10

County or Cape May County," said Rosica. "We have a Mainland kid, a bunch of kids from Egg Harbor Township, kids from Lower Cape May, Cape May Tech."

Rosica admires the players' work ethic on and off the field.

"What I really love about these kids," Rosica said, "is they're all here for one reason - they love baseball. They play so hard. We have some kids who need work who we're bringing along, and we have some kids who are really good ballplayers and have a shot at playing Division II or Division III baseball."

Rosica has years of

coaching experience, but considers this team a special group.

"For the most part the kids just bust their humps every day," said Rosica. "They play their hardest, and they have great attitudes. My first day when I showed up every one of them came up and introduced themselves, shook my hand, and welcomed me. They're just great kids. I've been coaching for a lot of years, and this is just a terrific group."

Of course, there's more to coaching young men than the work on the diamond.

"We really try to push the academic side of it to the kids," said Rosica. "Most of us on the coaching staff are older guys. I'm 60, the oth-

er coaches are in their 50s. The head coach played DI ball, the top assistant Jeff Ball played professional ball and managed the Surf and played for the Surf. So he's a former professional and an excellent baseball guy. Another coach, Doc, is a former teammate of mine (Edge "Doc" Mainland). He played at Fordham. So you have all these professional men coaching and mentoring these kids. It's great, I've just fallen in love with the place.

The coaches hope more players take advantage of this opportunity to continue their playing careers while earning their degree, right in their own back yard.

"It's a hidden gem and it's a resource that not



David Nahan/SENTINEL

Buccaneers player Usiel Marmolejos throws the ball in from the outfield during warmups before a double-header at Surf Stadium between his Atlantic Cape Community College team at the defending national community college champions, Brookdale. At left, Elaine Caraballo has a section to herself behind home plate as she watches her son, pitcher Anthony Caraballo.



enough Atlantic and Cape May kids avail themselves of," Rosica said. "They can come here and get coached up, it's sound academically, we have kids moving on to bigger and better things. It's a great program."

Be sure to check out a game at Surf Stadium, at 545 North Albany Ave. in Atlantic City.

"We have a beautiful

stadium in Atlantic City, you're sitting there with a view of the city while the game is going on, it's a beautiful venue. You have this great college baseball happening and it's mostly local kids. What's not to love?"

For more information visit atlantic.edu.

The last scheduled home game is against Bergen

Community College at 3 p.m. Friday, April 29. After that they are away against BCC for a doubleheader at noon and 3:30 p.m. April 30. Their final regular season game is at 2:30 p.m. May 3 at Ocean County College, finishing a suspended game. After that, playoff games are to be determined.

Echoes: Nice to hear baseball being played at Surf Stadium

Continued from B10

back to life.

A walk around the place quickly draws the memory of coming to the small professional stadium, an easily affordable venue where there isn't a bad seat for spectators, an intimate setting that let fans be up close and personal with their local team.

It was a favored location for Little League baseball and softball players to come on team outings with their families, the boys and girls getting a chance to run onto the field and be near the Surf players. Children imagining a future as Big

Leaguers. Parents imagining all sorts of futures for their children.

But the Surf never got the full support it needed or deserved.

The Atlantic City Surf played at Surf Stadium - formerly know as The Sandcastle and Bernie Robbins Stadium - from 1998 to 2008. The professional team ceased operations and disbanded before the 2009 season was to start.

The stadium went quiet and time began to extract its price.

Walking around inside on a bright day in the nearly deserted place kindles a

melancholy of what could have been - or distant hope of what still might be.

And then comes the distant thump of a fastball landing in the catcher's glove. The crack of a baseball off a bat. The yells of players encouraging their teammates to hustle to first base and for infielders to make the throw in time.

There is life in here. Baseball life.

It is a midweek double-header between the Atlantic Cape Community College Buccaneers baseball team and the defending national community college champions - Brookdale Community College.

The Buccaneers, comprised mostly of graduates from Cape-Atlantic League high schools - including Lower Cape May Regional, Mainland Regional, Middle Township, Cape May Tech, Egg Harbor Township, Ansegami - would go on to split games with Brookdale, an achievement for the program.

While the stadium is mostly empty, there are fans scattered throughout the seats to watch the game. Elaine Caraballo has a section all to herself behind home plate as she watches the starting pitcher, her son, Antonio, an Egg Harbor Township High School graduate who would go on to earn the win against Brookdale.

If the few spectators had gotten there an hour or so before game time, they would have seen visual confirmation of what they already know: the Buccaneers is a working man's team. Everyone pitches in to get things ready.

Lower Cape May Regional grad Eric Goss sweeps the dirt out of the dugouts and then helps head coach Rodney Velardi line the field. Mainland Regional grad Ty Rzemek holds the string when Goss takes over from Velardi to create the first-base line. Assistant coach Bert Rosica rakes the infield.

Players take batting practice in the cage in the dark cavern beneath the

stadium.

The coaches have them work inside the netting because they don't want them practicing their batting on the field that early, knowing these young men will swing for the fences. That means lost baseballs that fly over the fence or through the gaps and swings wasted on attempted home runs when the players need to focus on singles and doubles, the kind of hits that win games.

This is junior college baseball, but more than that it is an incentive, according to the coaches.

It is an incentive that works two ways.

The players may come for

the baseball and get to earn a degree along the way, or they come for the degree and as a bonus get to play baseball, a chance to continue their athletic careers beyond high school.

The associate degree can propel them on to a four-year school or better job prospects and two years of junior college ball just may send them on to a four-year college team.

It is a win-win for athletics and academics.

And on a Wednesday afternoon in late April, it is a win for Surf Stadium, when the emptiness is abated by the joyous sound of baseball.



David Nahan/SENTINEL

There are many signs of how little used Surf Stadium has been since the team disbanded in 2009. Above, payphones and plywood covering a door opening. At left, a mural by the security fences at the main entrance.

Bucs baseball filled with local players

Continued from B10

alumni have been incredible too, really faithful to the program. A couple were in the dugout with us today, and they come out to help with practice, whatever they can do to give back to the team.

"We tell the guys that even though they're only here for two years to get their degree, and then move on, they're always going to be part of this and welcome to come back. In fact I require them to come back and give back to the program as much as they can."

The team is a chance to play college ball for young men who may not have found the opportunity at a four-year school, and an extra incentive to get their degree.

"There's a ton of research to support students being involved in athletics doing better in school," Velardi said. "It helps them manage their time better, organization, discipline, everything. For a lot of these players, if it wasn't for baseball they might not be in school."

"For some of them school wasn't their thing early on. That's fine, some people get out school and go right to work and that's their deal. There's nothing wrong with that. But some of these guys realized this was their second chance. They worked for a year or two and decided they wanted to come back and get their degree. They wanted to come back to school, and baseball was their vehicle to get back into school and stay involved and active."

Some students may even use the program as a springboard to continue playing afterward.

"Some of them mature more physically a little later or they develop a little later athletically," said Velardi. "So when they were juniors or seniors in high school maybe they went under the radar. This gives them two more years to develop and mature. Maybe they can move on to play at a four-year school. There are plenty of schools around us, there are a ton of options out there for these kids. So overall, this is a really positive thing for them. Even if they don't end up at a four-year school, the fact is they're going back and getting their associate's degree. Hopefully they find a career they're interested in and go from there. But as a baseball program, we're looking to get kids into schools to continue their baseball careers. We've had kids end up on club teams at LSU. It's been great."

Not many people, let alone 20-year old college students, get to say they play on a professional baseball field.

"The stadium was shut down for a while," said Velardi, "but a lot of the guys remember coming here when they were kids, watching the fireworks. They remember seeing Coach Ball play here and manage here with the Surf. They come back and this is the field they remember seeing Major League players, and it's a pretty special experience for them."

Beyond baseball and school, the coaching staff wants to help the players become better young men.

"The biggest thing we hope they take from this is character," said Velardi. "We want to build character. They're pretty much all good kids. Things don't always go your way in life. Life is not easy. Coming out here and playing against some of the top teams in the nation day in and day out builds character. You learn to deal with loss and bounce back. You learn to win with class. We're starting to win a few games here and for some of them that's new. We want them to take that and move on to the next game. Win or lose, we want them to put it behind them and just try to get better every day."

Sports can be a great teacher. "There are going to be times where everything is going great and then all of a sudden it feels like the wheels are falling off," said Velardi. "Life can go downhill in a hurry and you want to be able to slow things down, slow your mind down. In a game you have to just think about your next move, the next play. Life is the same way. Things happen - you can lose a job or not get the job you wanted. Where do I go from there? Do I just fold and give up or just get back to the grind? You keep working, get back on your feet, and keep moving forward."

Matt Rzemek Mainland Regional

Third baseman Matt Rzemek, a Mainland Regional High School alumnus, plans to transfer to Rowan University and study health and exercise science after earning his associate's degree.

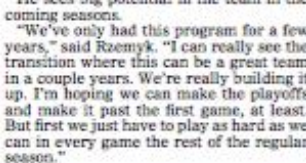
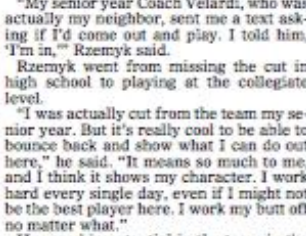
"Hopefully I can play baseball there too," he said. "You never know."

He's seen ups and downs this season but is optimistic.



David Nahan/SENTINEL

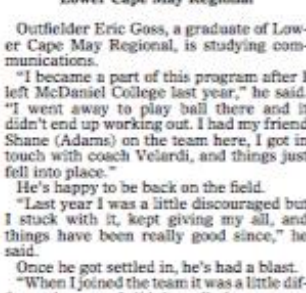
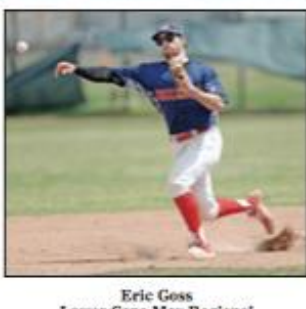
Clockwise from above, Buccaneers players Ty Rzemek, Chris Russ, Shane Adams, Thomas Hutchison, TJ Neil and, below, Antonio Caraballo on the mound.



Antonio Caraballo/SENTINEL



Eric Goss
Lower Cape May Regional



Antonio Caraballo/SENTINEL

"I want to cut back on the errors, get my average up a little bit, and everything should fall into place. Hopefully the whole team can pick it up a little bit and we can get some wins."

The Buccaneers schedule is grueling, but Goss believes they're up to the task.

"We play a lot of tough teams but we never give up," he said. "That's the thing about our team - we have a lot of character and heart. I think the end of our schedule is a little easier than the beginning, so we're going to keep battling. Down the stretch and into next year, we're going to be a really good team."

Chris Russ Cape May Tech

Catcher Chris Russ, a Cape May County Technical High School grad, is studying criminal justice.

"I knew ACCC had a program a couple years ago when I was in high school," he said. "Then I played on a summer team for coach Ball and he told me I should come out here. I played last year and it was really big step up from the high school level."

It's forced him to raise his level of play. "It's made my game a lot more diverse," Russ explained. "There's faster pitchers, there's a lot of different pitchers to call and block the pitches. The mindset of being able to see everything on the field is different, and how you track balls - especially here with the wind off the ocean."

He works with Bert Rosica, the catching instructor.

"Coach Bert is great, he makes everything fun," said Russ. "Whatever we're doing, he stays positive. He gives us good talks, keeps our heads up, and he's a big addition for this year. He helps everybody's attitude."

He's hoping for a late-season push from the team.

"I want to see us make the playoffs," he said. "We have a great group of guys. Compared to last year, we don't have as many guys. We went from 26 to 15, but the talent level is up, and we're a tight group. We've all come together and it's really fun playing together."

It helps when so many of the players are local kids.

"I think half of the starting group are all south Jersey guys," said Russ. "Seeing the younger guys come in and get to play, it's incredible to see what this program has become and how far it can go."

Russ has fond memories of the Sandcastle as a kid.

"I used to come here as a kid and I still have a signed Surf baseball hanging on my wall," he said. "It's great, I can't believe I've gotten to play here for two years. Major League players have played here."

Antonio Caraballo Egg Harbor Township

Pitcher Antonio Caraballo earned the victory in the first game of the double-header against Brookdale.

"I started off a little slow, but I'm starting to get there now," said the former Egg Harbor Township High School Eagle. "The tough competition is definitely making us better, making us stronger. We're seeing better pitching."

Caraballo hopes to develop his game enough to move on to a four-year school and play.

"I'm definitely looking to continue my baseball career after I leave here," he said.

But for now, he's enjoying every minute with the Buccaneers.

"This group is a lot of fun," Caraballo said. "I knew a couple of the guys coming in, we have a lot of great guys here and we have a lot of fun. A couple of us went to EHT. I knew I knew DJ (Cericola) from high school, I knew TJ Neil from Absegami and we were really good friends. It's pretty cool to be able to play with those guys."

Caraballo actually got on the field as a youngster at Surf Stadium.

"It's really cool playing here," he said. "I actually used to be a batboy for the Surf. I never thought I'd be playing here. It brings back some memories for sure."

This season has helped him stay on an even keel.

"This program has definitely made me a better player," he said. "It's made me concentrate more. I don't get down or put too much pressure on myself. It's been really good for me."

Like his teammates, he's holding hope for a push to the postseason.

"I want to see us make the playoffs," said Caraballo. "You never know what can happen. We're pushing right now to get back to .500."



David Nahan/SENTINEL

Above, players on the Atlantic Cape Community College Buccaneers underneath the stands at Surf Stadium taking batting practice before a double-header against Brookdale Community College. At right, players warm up on the field with the downtown Atlantic City skyline in the background.

