

# Ripken World Series a boon to Aberdeen, region

## Hotel rooms, restaurants packed during nine-day international event



Jesus Vega, 12, watches Josh Russo, 12, take bacon from his plate during breakfast at the Courtyard by Marriott Aberdeen at Ripken Stadium. Christian Whidden, 12, is on the right. Their Tampa, Fla., team is playing in the Cal Ripken World Series. (Baltimore Sun photo by Kim Hairston / August 18, 2009)

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William Hancock and Colby Richburgh were swinging bats near the hitter's cage as their championship squad from Arkansas got ready for a Cal Ripken World Series game against a tough Oregon team.

But they spared a few moments to talk about the food they've sampled during their stay in Aberdeen.

"Quizno's, Applebee's, Taco Bell," said William, 12, ticking off some places he has dined.

"The crab cakes right here [at the Ripken complex] are awesome," Colby, age 13, added.

With 14 Arkansas players and four coaches staying in Aberdeen, 50 fans of the Little Rock Warriors camped at a local hotel and 15 other 12-and-under teams staying in town doing pretty much what they are, the boys were but hors d'oeuvres in the profitable feast the Cal Ripken World Series is bringing to the regional economy again this year.

"There's not a hotel room available in the county," said Jim Richardson, director of the Harford County Office of Economic Development. "The restaurants are full. The [Ripken] complex is hopping. It's a fun time, as always."

It's the tenth anniversary of the Cal Ripken World Series, which was first held in Mattoon, Ill., but which moved to the Ripken Baseball Complex -- now its permanent home -- in 2003.

At 3:30 on Saturday, the American champion selected from a field of eight U.S. regional winners and two Maryland teams will square off for the title against the best of six foreign entrants. The title game will be broadcast coast-to-coast on the MLB Network.

Richardson's office last measured the economic impact of the nine-day event in 2006, when 25,000 people attended games. This year's crowds, some numbering 500, are noticeably bigger, projecting to a total attendance of somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000, organizers say.

That would mean a bigger impact than the \$1.8 million it brought to Aberdeen and \$2.6 million it brought to the state three years ago -- even though there's no cost for admission.

"Even in a down economy, people are looking for ways to spend quality time with their families and minimize the impact on their pocketbooks," said Rob Weinhold, vice president of Ripken Amateur Baseball and the tournament's director. "This game is recession-proof, if you do it right."

Weinhold spoke in the manicured outfield of Cal Sr.'s Yard, a replica of [Camden Yards](#) and the crown jewel of the four fields designed for players between the ages of 11 and 13. Fans were filing in an hour early for Little Rock's 5 o'clock game this week.

Down the hill at [Fenway Park](#), a field that comes complete with its own [Green Monster](#), about 250 people crowded the sidelines as the Dominican Republic, featuring 6'5" fireballer Jefferson Mejia, 13, battled Mexico. Another 150 watched at [Wrigley Field](#) as the Maryland state champs, the Upper Montgomery Athletic Club, faced Northwest Bakersfield, Calif.

The red-brick Courtyard by Marriott looms above right field in Cal Sr.'s Yard, evoking Camden Yards images, and in the lobby and indoor pool, players and parents congregated, talking schedules. Four Korean dads, puffing cigarettes, huddled and talked baseball. Three players drifted toward the fields, jabbering in Japanese.

Baseball groups have booked all 198 rooms at the Marriott, said manager Kathy Greene, including contingents from Lexington, Ky., Brick Township, N.J., and a juggernaut from Tampa, Fla., that includes pitcher Darren Gooden, son of former [Mets Cy Young](#) winner Dwight Gooden.

A wholesome atmosphere, Greene said, makes the event a big draw.

"How often can you go places that are free, where you get such to feel such an all-inclusive spirit?" she says.

Off-site, too, baseball seems to fill the air. Ballplayers and their parents are in evidence at eateries and hotels up and down the Route 22 corridor, from the Taco Bell and [Burger King](#) to the Olive Tree Italian Restaurant on Beards Hill Road, where manager Pam Hullett said the tournament brings so much business that management adds extra staff this time every year to accommodate -- along with instructions to be more flexible than usual about large groups arriving without reservations.

"The players don't always know to call ahead," she said, "but the mothers do. Either way, they're great

for business. We love having them."

The Greene Turtle, a sports-themed restaurant up the street, gets regular business from the 10-field Ripken complex, which hosts camps all summer, but the World Series has meant a bump. Server Devin King said he and his colleagues have bagged \$300 in tips some nights, and manager Kevin Shols said the crowds have been a boon at a time of year -- just before the kickoff of the [NFL](#) season -- that can often be slow.

"The tournament is a big boost," said Janet Emmons, director of the Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce. "Some of the little hotels that might not normally get so much business are packed. The restaurants are full. It's good for the economy and for these kids in general."

On the Ripken grounds, kids jumped on moon bounces and parents ate Italian Ices. At Fenway Park, Carlos Noriega, manager of the Tampa team, watched with eight of his players as Mejia hurled 85-m.p.h. heat at Mexico.

"We might have to face him," Noriega said. "I hope so, anyway."

His team's contingent was about 65 people, including 14 players and coaches.

The total bill was at \$32,000 and counting. The team had raised most of it themselves.

Was it worth it?

Noriega glanced at the players and coaches, who appeared glued to every pitch.

"Are you kidding? I'll be lucky to get them back home," he said.

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