

A team steeped with tradition

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On the south-eastern outskirts of Barrie lies the tiny community of Ivy in the township of Essa. With a population of less than 100, a small crossroads in the midst of farms and sweeping hillsides, Ivy is a classic slice of vintage North American rural life.

It's a place that hasn't changed since it was founded and if you blink you may miss it, but if you catch it, especially in summer, like an errant fly ball that's drifted just off Highway 27, you won't soon forget it.

And here's why.

Ivy has a baseball team, and not just any team. It's a team steeped in tradition and history. For more than 100 years, the baseball club has drawn in families, boys and men every spring to play ball.

You'd think you've just passed through a portal and been dropped down into the heart of Midwest USA as you enter this gentle farming community.

Here, the game isn't hockey, but baseball, and the field on which it's played is as old as the hills, full of memories which remain locked in its brazen chest of emerald green sod.

This tiny little ballpark squeezed in between a community centre, a church, country homes and a wheat field is as unique as they come.

With a row of century-old cedar trees towering over the left-field fence, visiting teams are treated to the incredible opportunity of literally hitting balls

into the bush. A ball that careens off a tree en route to a home run is considered in-play, certainly creating some wild base-running improvisation.

"If this place could talk," says Al Elliott, who coaches the Ivy team and has been a player and coach in the community since as long as he can remember, "they would have stories to tell."

Tall, forever standing with arms crossed, and a brow as rigid as a Louisville Slugger, he gave me the feeling that beneath his tough exterior was a deep well of memories.

Al's 23-year-old son, Brett, is on the team, marking the fourth generation of Elliotts to play ball in the Ivy Park, dating all the way back to 1909 when Brett's great-granduncle, Sam, first played for the team.

In 1939, the team first joined the North Dufferin Baseball League and in that first season won the title, which it has managed to do six more times since.

This year marks a special year, because the team amalgamates with the Barrie senior 'A' squad, and also

because the old park will receive \$35,000 in field upgrades.

Will the trees be removed? "The trees will stay," says Al.

I get the feeling that removing the trees would be a bit like taking out the field's soul.

Along with Al, in charge of guiding the troops is Dave Speers, who has been with the team for 30 years. There is also Vance White, who comes over as co-manager with his cluster of boys from Barrie.

Both are baseball lifers, having coached many of the guys on the team since they were knee-high to a grasshopper.

"Ivy has always had a good team, and has always been an organization that all the other teams look up to," says Vance of his new group.

Vance and Al stand beyond second base on a patch of fresh spring grass, eyes squinting in the sun. Nearly 300 feet from home plate, the row of cedars tower in the distance, and further yet, the tan wheat field lays beneath a cloudless cobalt sky.

They chat occasionally; their gloved-hand hangs under an armpit, while the other rubs the Sunday scrub of their chin.

Intermittently, they holler encouragement to the batter, which, in typical baseball fashion, come wrapped in ridicule.

"We got the kiddies T in the dugout if you need it."

A few on-field chuckles are shared and pretty soon you get the feeling this is more than just a collection of men wanting to play baseball.

I feel like an outsider, like I just walked into someone's living room.

Jeremy Uylenbroek, 33, the team's catcher who is an 11-year-veteran, confirms my intuition when I ask what it means to him to play for this team.

"It's more like a bunch of brothers that get together and play ball, a real family," he says.

"This is different than any other organization I have ever played for. Everyone takes care of each other here."

His words and his straightforward tone hit me with the power of a line drive.

Within minutes of being at the field, I can see just how important this group of guys are to each other.

I am instantly envious of the bond, instantly wishing I was among them.

"It's a numbers game. We're getting older, guys aren't playing as much, get the core of one team and the core of another." says Dave Reid, 26, the catcher from Barrie who has joined the squad this year, as he talks of the amalgamation.

"But we've known these guys a long time," says Reid. "In fact, we won a tournament together last year, so we're pretty familiar with each other."

I thank Dave as he runs back out on the field to shag more balls. Then I press the playback button on my recorder as he shuffles past Al and Vance, tapping them in that way baseball players do, a little rough, a little tender at the same time.

As he settles in just past second base to field a ground-ball his voice sounds out from the machine: "It's especially nice to be here in Ivy, you know... it means a lot to the people here."

I replay it again. The sound of wood on ball cracks the spring air as I look to right field and see homes that have undoubtedly had a few baseballs turn up in their yards over the years. "It means a lot to the people here."

I see the community centre, the church and the dilapidated dugouts, which aren't up for upgrade this year, and I begin to understand how right he must be.

The Ivy Leafs are an institution for this rural farming community that's no more than a Ruthian homerun from the outskirts of Barrie, but above all, the Leafs are a family in a tight-knit village that comes out every spring to celebrate their game together and in doing so, they celebrate each other.

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