

Baseball

THE San Francisco Giants' young, scrappy collection of ballplayers has perked up the interest of fans by putting together a winning season this year. The Giants' slogan, "You Gotta Like These Kids," has become the most memorable in years — because it's true.

But how about those Santa Cruz Cubs? The county's brand-new semipro baseball club — mostly local prospects home from college for the summer — has charged to a 23-9 first-season record, collecting loyal fans of its own through outstanding hitting, pitching, defense and late-inning drama.

Last season there was no program in the county to pool this area's always high-caliber college-age talent. Now we suddenly have one of the best semiprofessional summer league teams in the state.

You've Gotta Like THESE

by Karl Neice

SUMMER in Santa Cruz has usually meant suntans, surfing, sailing and attractive people wearing nearly nothing. Baseball? It's a hot, dry sport played on inland dust and full of boring distractions.

Santa Cruz' present-day ultraliberal image belies its All-American beginnings as a place that immigrants built and parlayed into a reasonably successful resort town.

While the tree-and-sea ambiance is great for the new-age seekers and shufflers who come to find themselves, under the surface exist a lot of regular folks who grew up here doing what they do all over America. One of those things is baseball.

"It's a natural," said Cubs manager

John O'Connor. "The other teams and their families like to come to Santa Cruz. It's good for the city and tourism, they all want to come over here to the beach on the weekends anyway, and they spend their money here."

O'Connor's campaign to build a semipro baseball club harkens back the days when every American town had such a team. Families gathered on Sundays at the ballpark for a picnic and to razz the team visiting from another county. It was a focus for community pride as well as a good excuse to yell at the top of their lungs at great plays and bad calls.

That hometown flavor

THOSE days are gone for the most part, but a team like the Cubs can revive some of that feeling. The Cubs

are "95 percent local kids home from college" because O'Connor and right-hand coach Craig Bartlett wanted first of all to create an opportunity for former local high-school stars and who are now career-building collegians.

"If there's a criteria," O'Connor said, "it's to play college players returning to school where they're involved with baseball programs, and to give them an opportunity to play and develop. Hopefully some of these guys will graduate from college and go on to play minor- or even major-league baseball."

"It's a thrill for the coaches and the folks at home here. If we can sustain a program where three or four years down the road you see some of these guys playing ball in the major leagues, well maybe we helped them out a little. That's the overriding

philosophy."

Other semipro clubs, such as the perennial state champion Santa Maria Indians, recruit college players from all over the nation. They produce winners, but O'Connor called that method "a contrived situation. Down in Santa Maria, I think they have two Californians on the whole team. I want to be competitive, but I want to retain that hometown flavor. Right now we believe we have enough players out of this county to be a respectable team."

Until the Cubs, there hadn't been a bona-fide focal point here for young baseball talent after high school. When summer arrives, baseball is on TV or in the hearts of Little League and American Legion League players, parents and friends. Because UCSC is not rated as a college baseball power, the feats of local high-school stars tend to fade — unless they make the major leagues like Mark Eichhorn of Watsonville.

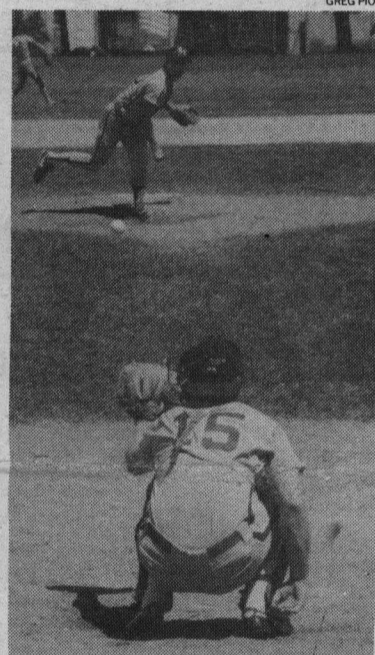
Eichhorn is now electrifying the major leagues as a member of the American League East Division champion Toronto Blue Jays with his baffling, almost underhand delivery. His exploits against the powerful New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox have made him a Rookie of the Year contender, and his impressive statistics are followed daily in the local papers. If the Cubs had been together when he was in college, hometown fans might have witnessed the blooming of Eichhorn's talent during the summer breaks.

Cubs' manager John O'Connor wants to make things like that happen.

"It's exactly what I want my Coltleaguers, who are 15 and 16, to see. If we make a go of it, they'll be saying, 'Well maybe someday I can be on the Cubs.'"

Labor of love

THE 38-year-old native of a small town near Niagara Falls arrived in Santa Cruz in 1980 after giving life in Phoenix and Berkeley a try. O'Connor paid some dues coaching youngsters in the various levels of Little League from 1982 until he knocked at UCSC's door in 1985, offering to



Cubs' pitcher David Wood and catcher Bill Miller warm up

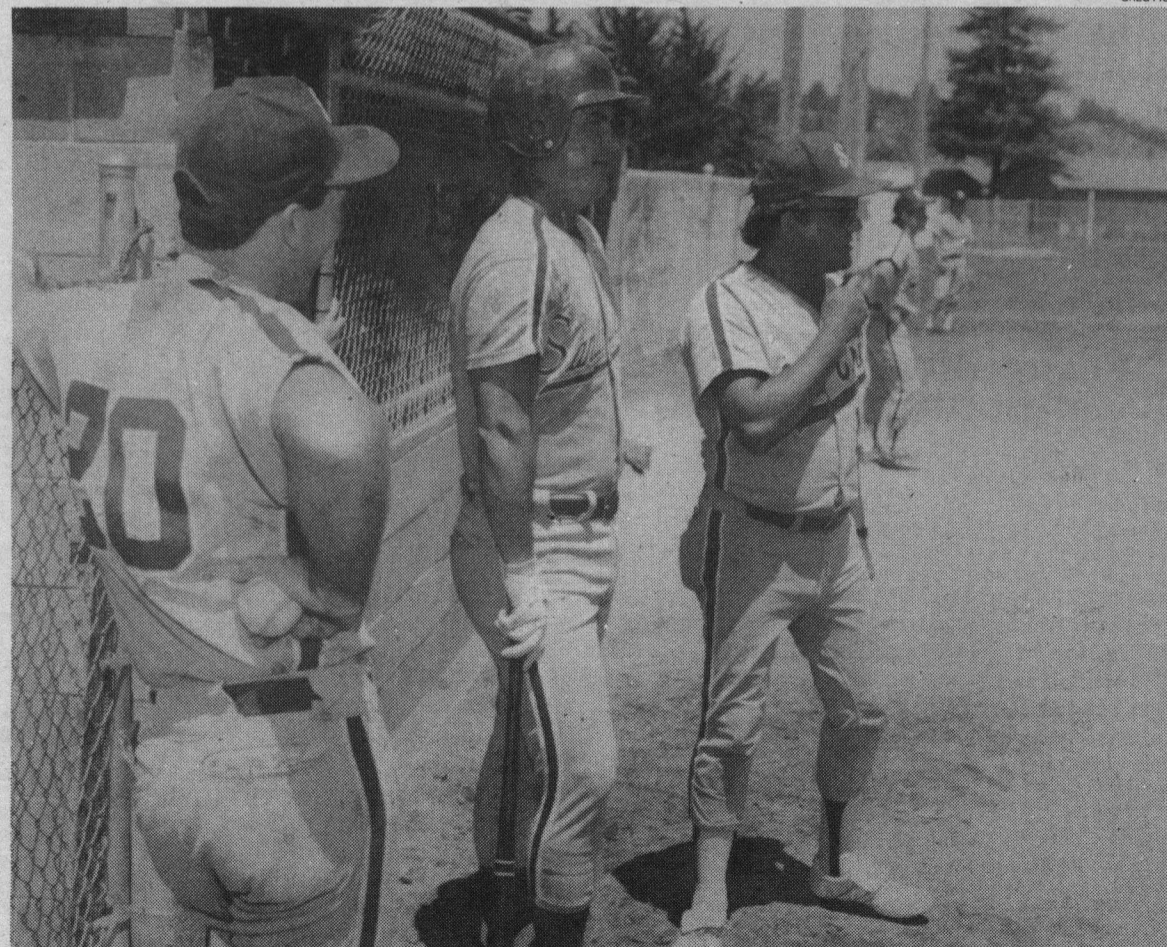
start up a baseball club where there hadn't been one since 1965.

O'Connor put together a squad which played 21 games, winning only four. He left when it became apparent it might take a decade to get a competitive team together with all the other under-funded league sports on the hill. He was right. This year the UCSC club played only four games, winning none.

With the help of several area baseball junkies, O'Connor and Bartlett decided to make a go of the semipro Santa Cruz Cubs.

"It's much easier to set up a semipro club. You and I can hash out the details in about five minutes. Then you just have to pull it together," O'Connor said. No red tape, but there are other time-consuming details: Scouting and signing former star high-schoolers now playing for hotshot college teams, finding uniforms, getting league sanctions, putting a schedule together.

However, most of those details are a labor of love. It seems that after staying alive, he loves baseball most. It isn't easy to juggle making a living, coaching Colt and Palomino leagues as well as pushing



Gary and Jim Iffland listen to the wisdom of manager John O'Connor

Kids

the Santa Cruz Cubs into their first year.

How does he do it? "I sometimes ask myself that question," O'Connor laughs. "After six games in six days with back-to-back doubleheaders. You get a little burned out. But after one or two days off I'm ready to go again. I don't know. I just love it. It's the mystery of never knowing what's going to turn out, something new every day. And when you see these great games where we come from behind in the bottom of the ninth inning, these are classic ball games — games you dream about. There's a fascination that I share with about 20 million other people, we just love it."

There are many like him nearby, and many offered advice and help to get the Cubs off the ground. Among them: Bob Frietas, the last general manager of the Pacific Coast League San Francisco Seals and now a broker for minor league teams all over the nation; and Soquel resident Orville Orton, whose son John starred at Soquel High School and played in successful longtime semipro clubs in Alaska and in Santa Maria before making the U.S. Olympic team this year as a catcher.

Along with their expert advice on how to build a self-sustaining semipro club, O'Connor depended on city parks and recreation scheduler Dee Herron, himself a Santa Cruz High School baseball star who played four years at BYU.

"Without Dee, we wouldn't be here," O'Connor said simply. "Harvey West is a nice ballpark, and there's a lot of activity there. But we were flexible, and he was flexible, and it all worked out. There's a logjam of teams over the hill and a lack of parks to play in. So when we decided to play we booked a whole pile of games real fast."

Because the top-rated Division AAA league schedule was already made, the Cubs began in Division AA. But O'Connor called some of the more respected, longtime teams in the Bay Area to come on over and check out the Cubs. Not only to play but to share ideas on how to keep a club together over the years.

O'Connor invited the San Francisco Senators — together more than



The hometown kids. Top row (from left): Jim Ifland, David Wood, Gregg Wagner, Bill Miller, Rich Sheppard, Mike Rivas, Burch Boehner, Kevin Grindy and manager John O'Connor. Bottom row: Mike Saucedo, Glenn Sugimoto, Matt King, Gary Ifland and the invaluable Matt Bartlett. The uniforms came from Santa Clara U, some of the patches worked, and some didn't. O'Connor hopes to buy some old Chicago Cubs' uniforms for next season.

40 years — the Los Altos Expos, San Jose Yankees and Contra Costa Giants. The Cubs took a trip to Stockton to face the "always tough" Crushers, and even took on the state champion Santa Maria Indians, losing 4-0. "Even that was a great game; our pitcher (David Wood) gave up only two earned runs."

"The non-profit corporation like Santa Maria has is my model — their club and the San Francisco Senators, who even have a team bus.

"They're the guys we knocked off Tuesday night (Aug. 5)."

What a game it was

AT the mention of the victory, O'Connor lit up. The shopworn explanations of how a semipro team is put together vanished when the opportunity to relive one of the Cubs gutsy, flourishing finishes came to the fore.

"Oh boy," O'Connor sighed. "What a game that was. We were down 6-5 in the bottom of the ninth inning. Bases

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MOST of the Santa Cruz Cubs are former high school stars from Santa Cruz, Soquel, Aptos and Watsonville who now play in college programs. Manager John O'Connor and coach Craig Bartlett compiled a list of 22 players who fit that criteria.

"We concentrated on the talent in town, we had a list of 20 that we really wanted to go after. We knew if we could get them, we could have a really good team."

With American Legion leagues winding down, the Cubs expect to be bolstered with pitchers as they head into the Monterey Bay Tournament to be held Aug. 23, 24, 30, 31 and Sept. 1 at Harvey West Park, Cabrillo College and Soquel High School.

Following is a partial roster of Cub standouts and some comments from O'Connor.

Matt King, second base, Aptos High School, now plays at Cal Poly: "Lots of spirit, a team leader."

Kevin Grindy, pitcher, Santa Cruz High School, now at UC Davis: "Has a breaking pitch (curve) and a slider (fastball that appears to slide, but dips at the last moment). He pitches with control, that's the key. Here's a kid that could do something. He's only lost one ballgame, won eight."

Gregg Wagner, center field: "Bats lead off for Andy Messersmith (ex-major leaguer with L.A. Dodgers, now a coach) at Cabrillo. Very good stick (bat)."

Burch Boehner, DH (designated hitter). Now a sophomore at Santa Clara University: "He's made every practice and every game. He's a pitcher, but right now he's got a sore arm. As a hitter he's put together a few streaks, a home run, and a couple of game-winning RBIs (runs batted in). Another kid with a great attitude."

Memo Torres, first base, DH, Watsonville High School: "He's even caught and pitched. If I had to name a most valuable player at this time, he'd be it. He's got three home runs, has nine game-winning RBIs including four in a row he won for us single-handedly, and brings the intangibles of a great attitude, team spirit and talent."

Bill Miller, catcher, first base, Harbor High School now at UCLA: "Here's a guy who's been unable to play much at the big school but he's back in the groove playing for us, keeps us charged up, burning."

Jim Ifland, first base, third base, Harbor High School, now at Oklahoma State: "Oklahoma State made it to the final four (College World Series) so

he's had a taste of the big time. He's got lots of clutch hits for us. Very competitive player, even pitched a little for us."

Gary Ifland, utility player, Jim's cousin from L.A.: "Very good hitter, plays good infield and outfield."

Rich Sheppard, right fielder, from Los Gatos, now a sophomore at Cal Poly: "One of the few out of area players on our team. He's hard-nosed, an excellent outfielder. Any ball he gets near, he catches it. He's hit two home runs, great attitude. Would love to have him back next year."

Rich Raines, relief pitcher: "A working guy right now, went to Cabrillo for a couple of years. He's bailed us out in a lot of tough situations. Has great off-speed (slow pitches that upset batters' timing) stuff. When he's in control, he's unhittable."

David Wood, pitcher, San Lorenzo Valley High School now at USC: "His big game was a 4-0 loss to Santa Maria. But he kept one of the powerhouse teams in the U.S. to just two earned runs."

Glenn Sugimoto, second base, catcher: "Going to Cabrillo this year. A very, very good hitter. We hope to have him back next summer."

Mike Rivas, shortstop, Watsonville High School: "Team player. Good hitter. Always 100 percent."

Mark Saucedo, third base, Watsonville High School: "Gamer. Knows how to play his position. 100 percent all the time."

Tom Urbani, pitcher, third base, Harbor High School: "He just joined us Sunday from his American Legion team. I played him at third the first game, and he goes three-for-three with two RBIs. Then he picks up the victory pitching four innings in the second game."

WITH the team all year are two former college players and now working in town — **Rudy Escalante**, a catcher; and **Mike Pramuk**, a Boston College standout who moved here last year. "They've been very valuable, especially during the first part of the season."

Upcoming prospects who've recently wrapped up summer leagues in American Legion ball include **Terry Hopper**, pitcher (he played left field Sunday in both games) and **Jim Flynn**, pitcher (was DH with a hit in Sunday's second game).

Others will join as available "so I can have as tough a team as I can get for this tournament," said O'Connor. "I'd like to win the darn thing."

And there's a darn good chance he will. •