



Brady Johnson





Baseball Memories

Manitowoc Lincoln High School held its fourth annual Brady's Baseball Blast this past May, an event that celebrates one of the school's biggest baseball fans. **By Emily Attwood**

It's a Friday afternoon in mid-May. The temperature is in the upper 60s, not a cloud in the sky, and a light breeze is coming in off the lake. A perfect evening for baseball.

Thus started the fourth annual Brady's Baseball Blast at Manitowoc Municipal Field. Eight hours of baseball, food, games and prizes. What more could any fan ask for?

Brady Johnson was the son of Lincoln High School athletic director John Johnson. Brady was born with cerebral palsy, but his disability did not stop him from becoming Lincoln athletics' biggest fan. He loved to attend baseball games with his father and cheer on the players with high-fives. When Brady passed away at the age of 11 in 2007, his death had an instant impact on the school.

"When John got the call," recalls Heather Graceau, the softball coach, "he was at our softball game. As soon as he got the call, the girls knew that something was wrong. To notice that in the background, to find out that that's what it was, we immediately wanted to do something for the family, as did other spring sports."

The first Brady Johnson Baseball Blast was held in 2008, the year after Brady's death, though the planning began much earlier.

"Shortly after Brady's death, I read an article in *Sports Illustrated* about a Division III college baseball team from Ohio who raised money for their spring trip every year by playing an eight-hour marathon baseball game," Johnson says. "They just played as many innings as they could ... After I read that, I started thinking well, how cool it would be to have an event like that here at Lincoln to raise money for Brady and a Brady Johnson Scholarship, because of what he meant to Lincoln athletics."

Johnson approached the school's baseball coach, Bruce Steinbecker, and the idea took flight. Steinbecker took it to his players, and they took it from there.

"It's an opportunity for us to do something that gets us a little exposure," Steinbecker says, "and the memory of his son, and we really wanted to do something together that would become traditional, and it's kind of taken off."

Community support was and is the driving force behind the event. All of the food, prizes and kids' games are donated, not to mention the time parents and past alumni take to come in early the day of the event to set up and start the grills. Around 3:30, volunteers begin trickling through the gate, asking Johnson where he would like them or the tables they have brought, or what else they can help him with. The school's Poms team shows up shortly after, ready to paint faces and run the kids' games. The players have also been trickling in and have taken to the field, tossing balls and warming up.

For the athletes, this is an opportunity to get away from the seriousness of competition. The varsity baseball team has just four games left in the season – two of which will be played the following day – before tournament play begins. But on Friday, they're not thinking of any of that. Pitchers take to the outfield and shortstops hit the mound, breaking away from their designated positions to have some fun.

"It's great for our baseball program," says senior Ross Rhode. "We get all three levels (Freshman, JV and Varsity) together on one night. We're all separate every night, on different schedules. We're never really together very often."

Johnson estimates that the first year of the event brought in about 350 people, mostly the families of the baseball and softball players involved in the event. Attendance has grown each year since, though a cold and rainy 45-degree day put a damper on the event in 2010. A few of the seniors remember Brady from their freshman year, and a big collage at the entrance shares Brady's story with those who didn't know him. Even those who never knew Brady find common ground as baseball fans. By simply coming and enjoying the games, they are supporting his passion.

The money raised each year goes to the Brady Johnson Scholarship, which is awarded to two quiet and unassuming athletes who exemplify outstanding morals. One of this year's winners, though he doesn't know it at the time of the games, is baseball player Evan Dreger. The female winner is soccer player Rachel Keehan. New this year, a portion of the proceeds will also go to United Cerebral Palsy of Wisconsin.

Johnson's two daughters, Riley and Mackenzie, arrive with his wife, Bobbi Jo, who Johnson credits for her support when putting the event together every



year. Bobbi Jo was Brady's stepmom but speaks as fondly of him as only a mother could as she talks about Brady's trip to the Brewer game, which he preferred to watch from the concourse than amongst the noise of the stands.

The girls grow excited as the bouncy house inflates and drag mom over as soon as it's ready. Now five and eight, the girls were only one and four when their brother died. For them, this yearly event is a chance to get to know their brother and share his love of baseball – both are growing up to be avid Brewers fans as well.

The Brewers, especially Casey McGehee and his wife Sarah, have been big supporters of the event. The McGehees also have a son that suffers from cerebral palsy. Johnson and his wife have met with Sarah at games and events for cerebral palsy.

"I happened to be at a Brewer game one night a couple years ago," Johnson says. "I knew they had a little boy with cerebral palsy but that was about the extent of it, and I was sitting in the first level with my dad, who happens to be disabled. We were sitting in the last row of the first section behind home plate and it started to dawn on me that this little boy was having trouble moving around, and the more I thought about it, I thought, 'You know, that's Casey McGehee's son.' So I got out of my seat in one of the innings of the game and I went down and introduced myself to Sarah. I said 'Hey, I've got a lot of respect for what you go through with Mackail because we went through the same stuff with my son.' We just kind of struck up a conversation and that was about it."

The silent auction features a Casey McGehee bat and signed ball, as well as other Brewers paraphernalia, items donated from the Packers and a collection of community-donated prizes. Bernie and the Racing Sausages have made an appearance at past events, but tonight the Brewers have a home game and are unable to send any supporters.

The first game starts at 4:00; a JV-Varsity scrimmage. The crowd is still a bit sparse despite the gorgeous

weather, but as 5:00 comes, the stands begin to fill and the noise of the crowd picks up. The egg rolls have arrived as well. Provided by Manitowoc's Hmong community, they are a popular item at games, if a bit untraditional.

After the scrimmage comes one of the more entertaining games of the night, as the parents of the Varsity team take the field against their sons.

"Moms are automatically safe at first!" cries the announcer. The extra edge helps, and the parents pull out a 7-6 win.

At 6:00, Johnson welcomes the crowd and thanks everyone for their support. They bow their heads in a moment of silence for Brady before the national anthem. Then, the kids are invited onto the field for a home run derby. "Anyone up to 18," the announcer says, and a few Lincoln students take to the lineup.

Across the field, the softball team is warming up. They have a tournament the following day and put in a couple hours of practice before heading over to Municipal Field.

"I think the camaraderie of it all is fun," says Coach Graceau. "These are the last days of the season, and it's nice to do something with them in the spring as opposed to always giving them directions. It's a fun night for the high school."

They'll join the boys in the most competitive game of the night – against the Lincoln High School staff. This game is taken more seriously than the others, runners losing hats as they sprint for home. The trash talk has been building for weeks in the school's hallways, and the winners will be exercising their bragging rights come Monday morning.

The fog begins rolling in and the temperature drops as the softball team faces off against the baseball team; unicipal Field is only a couple of blocks from Lake Michigan, after all. On come the lights and out come blankets and jackets. This crowd is prepared for the long haul. Though the baseball and softball teams will call it quits around 10:00 so they can get in a good night's sleep before their games on Saturday, the games will go on until midnight, alumni players returning to take to the field under the bright lights. At the end of the night, they'll all go home, but they'll be back again next year.

"My ultimate dream," says Johnson as he looks out over the field, "would be to raise enough money here to put it into a foundation and let it grow until we're able to renovate this park and call it the Brady Johnson field."



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