

Ashland little leaguers practice baseball diplomacy

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By Kernan Turner Amigo Club

Eleven Ashland little leaguers traveled with their parents to Guanajuato, Mexico, last month to play in the third annual Sister City Baseball Classic. They quickly became Sister City ambassadors.

“Guanajuato is one of the most beautiful cities in the world; nice people,” 11-year-old Gabe Brabec said when asked for his overall impression of the week spent in Guanajuato. His teammate, Eyera Nogues, summed up the visit as “Awesome!”

They experienced Mexican home life and cuisine by staying with host families and sampling restaurant fare, ranging from tacos to elaborate dinners. The Amigo and Lions clubs greeted them, too.

They toured Guanajuato, descending deep inside the La Valenciana silver mine. The boys slid down the fire department’s pole, boys and parents rode a light-flashing fire truck through town while waving at people in the narrow streets. They visited the Museum of Mummies, a vineyard, and statues of Jesus and independence hero El Pipila.

They traveled by bus down a steep, cobblestoned mountain road to the Silao ballfield.

David Brabec, father of players Gabe and Sam, wrote a piece describing their trip and the Silao ballgame.

“Organized cheers came out of the stands with clapping and singing by large portions of the people,” he wrote, “... Those who couldn’t fit in the stands stood along the foul line to watch.”

The Mexicans won the game despite a near comeback by the Ashland team in the last inning that was cut short by a questionable call by Brabec as line referee.

“The Silao manager had decided to put the young kids in for the last inning, clearly comfortable with the lead,” Brabec wrote, “but our boys were beginning to heat up ... Hit after hit ... brought the score closer and closer. The crowd began to grow restless. We had bases loaded with two out when the ball was hit to the tiny second baseman. He snagged the grounder but was too short-armed to make the tag on the runner, and when he threw to first it was too late. I called the runner out, anyway.

“The crowd erupted. The organized cheers started up again and ... maybe 50 kids came pouring out of the Silao dugout. I high-fived every Silao player, and hugged the two managers ... As we walked out my son Sam informed me, not very subtly, that I had blown the call. I didn’t disagree with him.

“As we headed out to our bus, I could feel the stares. I waved and spoke the little Spanish I knew, ‘Buenas Noches, Gracias!’”

People waved back and shook his hand. A man handed him a hot tamale wrapped in cornhusk.

When Brabec got to the bus, his wife, Jenny Hall, asked where Sam was. Brabec hastened back to the stadium exit where people were still gathered.

“There was Sam,” Brabec wrote. “He was posing for pictures with a Mexican family. His blond hair, red sunburnt nose, and blue eyes stood out like the pastel buildings of Guanajuato. As soon as he was done taking pictures with one family, another would grab him and put

him in the middle of their picture, along with some Silao players. It was like he was a famous ball player.”

Sam recollected later, “It’s not important to win, but to have fun. I like Mexicans.”

Rich Rosenthal in Ashland and Armando Preciado in Guanajuato originated the baseball cultural exchange program. Little League President Greg White coached this year’s team, consisting of Pueo Benson, Eyera Nogues, Keller Bloodworth, Gabe and Sam Brabec, Jackson Rosenthal, Gavin White, Bridger Foss, Jojo Harrower, Colin Lawrence and Even Rhoden.

Amigo Club’s Entre Amigos (Between Friends) column about Ashland ties to its sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, appears on the third Tuesday of each month. Longtime AP reporter and bureau chief Kernan Turner is an Ashland resident and Amigo Club member.