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**A Year in the
Minor League Life
Katya Cengel**

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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To Marcus, for always being there when I need him

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Acknowledgments

When David Daley, my editor at the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, first approached me about following several Minor League Baseball players over a season, I was a little skeptical. I am a features writer, and I don't normally cover professional athletes. But then I got to know the players and the world of Minor League Baseball and realized it was the perfect setting for the kind of stories I love telling, those about regular people.

Robert Taylor believed, as I did, that the subject could be expanded into a great book and walked me through it. The teams made it all possible, with Tom Gauthier, Nick Evans, Keith Elkins, Megan Smith, and Josh Anderson helping to coordinate my trips.

Of course, without the players, presidents, and managers, there would have been nothing to write. I am grateful to them for letting me into their lives. Then there are the family mem-

bers, fans, ushers, host families, and other people who were so generous with their time and stories.

Photographers James Calvert and Alex Slitz captured the images I hope I conveyed in words. My mother and stepfather provided valuable feedback and support, and my sister, friends, and other family members helped me in every way they could.

But the most important was Marcus, who has all the patience I lack and helped me in more ways than I can list.

Introduction

In many ways, the story of independent and Minor League Baseball in Kentucky is the story of baseball. It is a tale of dreams, history, and heartache.

There are the former Major Leaguers who spent their early professional careers in little mountain towns—Greg Maddux, Dan Plesac, and Dwight Smith. Before they were in the bigs, all three played for Minor League teams in eastern Kentucky, where attendance sometimes didn't even reach the triple digits.¹ Bobby Flynn helped establish the first integrated team in the South when he, a white man, joined the black semiprofessional Lexington Hustlers in 1947.² Let's not forget Louisville, the state's largest city, where professional baseball has been a part of things for well over a century and whose Minor League Louisville Colonels nurtured such talents as Hall of Famers Earle Combs, Joe McCarthy, and Harold "Pee Wee" Reese, who embraced Jackie

Robinson when he broke Major League Baseball's color line.³

But that is just the background in which this book is set. The action takes place during the 2010 season, as three Minor and one independent league teams battle for fans, wins, and a future here in the Bluegrass.

These men are professionals—they are paid to play—but life for them is nothing like it is for their colleagues in the bigs. They are paid a fraction of what their Major League counterparts make, travel mostly by bus, and live with constant uncertainty, all in the belief that it will pay off down the road. But even among the best of them, the ones drafted, only about 5 percent to 10 percent will make it to the Majors.⁴

Some will never get past the first level, Rookie League. If they do, there is still Class-A Short-Season, Class-A (including high and low or advanced and regular), AA, and AAA. With more than a dozen leagues and almost two hundred teams that charge admission, the Minor League system is an immense maze through which some players never make it.⁵ But at least they are on the fast track, playing for a team affiliated with a Major League club. Players in the independent league have no such affiliation; they are a step below even the Minors. Down here the game is different; general managers in the Minor and independent leagues talk more about affordable family entertainment than winning. It's a business, and they are in the business of developing players and running a successful local operation.

The stories that hover around these lower-level teams are populated by characters trying to reach a goal, or keep one from slipping away. These are kids right out of high school living away from home for the first time, athletes from poor countries trying to find something better, and men well into their twenties struggling to hold on to the one thing they know.

And that's just the players. In the Minors you have managers who missed making the Majors now living a life just as exhausting as their players. They do it without the hope of fame, however, just to keep the taste of the sport in their system. There are wives who live their lives in limbo so their husbands can chase their dreams and children whose home is the road and whose toys must fit in a small storage container. There are also the fans, businesspeople, and politicians who brought the teams to town, the families that welcome players into their homes, and the entertainers who keep the crowds coming.

The characters who populate Kentucky's three Minor and one independent league teams include all of these and more. The Class-A Lexington Legends have a colorful president whose wife is an equally colorful state senator. Alan Stein is baseball in Lexington. If it wasn't for Alan, this Houston Astros farm team would not exist. Lexington has a spotty history with professional baseball, and several attempts to bring a team to the city before Alan met with failure. Instead of waiting for the city to fund the ballpark, Alan found investors and set to work. He has eaten cat food, slept in the stands, shaved his head, and endured a number of other hardships to keep his name in the spotlights and fans in the stands.

But as the team embarks on its tenth season, general manager Andy Shea, a former college baseball player, is playing more of an active role in the team's story. Hanging around the periphery of this story is Freddy Acevedo, a former player who followed his dream from the Dominican Republic only to watch it slip away in Lexington, far from the Majors and his home.

Toby Rumfield is closer to his dream. The Major League team that picked him in the second round of the 1991 draft is just across the Ohio River in Cincinnati. But Rumfield isn't

playing anymore; he is managing a team in Florence that is at the bottom of the bottom, a team that isn't even tied to a Major League team. This is where players go when they have been overlooked or released. This is their first stop on the way up or their last stop on the way down.

Rumfield's wife, Kari, is general manager here. Their three children are along for the ride, falling asleep in the stands, serving as bat boys and snack vendors. Baseball here is as close and as far as many fans will ever get to the stars of tomorrow. Spring training is here, not in Florida, and players live with local families, not in extended-stay hotels.

But it isn't quite as cozy as you might think. The team's original owner spent time in prison, and the team was in danger of falling into nonexistence until local businessman Clint Brown came to the rescue.

Restaurateur Rick Kelley and Warren County judge executive Mike Buchanon, the top elected leader of the county, didn't have to rescue the Bowling Green Hot Rods. They created them. The Class-A Tampa Bay Rays team was a key part of the city's downtown revitalization now under way. The team played its first season in 2009, right in the middle of one of the worst recessions in decades. The ballpark was built in about a year, the staff hired on the fly, the players brought in before there was a clubhouse. Now they are opening their second season and doing their best to build a fan base in a city that has little history of professional baseball.

Louisville's baseball history stretches back more than a century and remains present in places like the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory and Pee Wee Reese Road. This is where players go before the Majors, AAA, the last stop on the long road to the top, in this case the Cincinnati Reds. By the time they

arrive here, they may have wives and children. One day off a month, pay far below that of their Major League counterparts, and little security have begun to take their toll. The true stars sometimes skip AAA and go from AA to the Majors. Louisville is where players decide if it is worth it. It is also where Mary E. Barney spent twenty-five years working her way from receptionist to director of baseball operations.

These are the teams, and this is their story. There are few record breakers here or amazing statistics, just ordinary people who may someday become extraordinary, but may just as likely disappear into the annals of history.

In these cities, for these players and the people who watch and support them, baseball isn't a sport but a way of life, a childhood dream that just might come true. Over a season that dream can be derailed by injuries, debts, or bad timing. It can be made and then lost in the next game. This isn't the world of chartered planes and huge fame; this is the world of leaking roofs and sales calls made on cell phones while sitting on buckets. This is where it all begins, and, for many, where it ends.

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Part 1
Lexington Legends:
A Tale of Obsession



1. The Legend behind the Legends

I needed one man. But he wasn't sure he needed me. Convincing Kentucky's other Minor League Baseball teams to let me follow them for the season was easy: The team's public relations representative told the manager they needed to cooperate. And they did. That wasn't how it worked with the Lexington Legends. Only Alan Stein could grant me access to the team, and so far it didn't look like I would make it past his office.

Alan sat behind his desk, a classic southern old-boy type, or so I thought, with a mustache, several large shiny rings, suspenders, and a big belly. His schedule is kept by a secretary, and his oldest son is named Wade, after the Confederate Civil War soldier Wade Hampton. But his youngest son is named Scooter, after the late Hall of Fame Yankees shortstop Phil Rizzuto, nicknamed the Scooter. As I quickly figured out, although Alan wasn't impressed by the idea of being in a book—he had already

been in one—he was impressed that I knew something about Minor League Baseball. Later I would discover just how far he was willing to go for the sport, but right then all I needed to know was that I was in with Alan, the Legends’ president.

Alan wasn’t always the man in charge. Growing up Jewish in the South in the mid-twentieth century meant the only way he could play golf at the local country club was by sneaking in through a hole in the fence. No blacks. No Jews. When Alan’s dad was invited to be the first Jewish member, he turned them down. He didn’t want to be a token. His eldest child has no such qualms about being referred to as the face of the Legends. Alan is now chief operating officer of a management company that owns multiple Minor League Baseball teams in addition to the Legends, but in a way the Legends are still his, and he is still the Legends. He is obsessed. He had to be to do what he did.

But I wouldn’t realize that until later. It was still February, and the first big competition was not between athletes on a field but between singers at the Fayette Mall in Lexington. There are no bats, no balls, and not much testosterone. Instead there is a temporary stage, hovering mothers, dolled-up teens, and the Beaumont Quartet. This is the quartet’s third year at the Legends’ annual national anthem tryouts, and they are pretty much guaranteed success. Not only did they make the cut the past two years, but they also have a winning record—both times they performed, the Class-A Legends won the game. So they are far from fazed by the competition gathered at the mall this Sunday afternoon.

They are also of an age where they see the tryouts for what they are—a chance to sing at a Minor League Baseball game—and not a jump-start on the road to fame. They already have careers, or, in the case of Bob Hooker, had them. Bob is fifty-nine and

retired. Mark and Frieda Gebert are professors in their midforties and fifties, and Frieda's sister, Kathy Shewmaker, is a "fiftyish" grade school teacher.

The singing started about a decade ago when they took part in a Christmas show at the nearby Beaumont Inn. They read about the Legends' auditions three years ago and figured "it could be a hoot," says Frieda.

"We like baseball," adds her sister, Kathy.

Mark may like it a little too much. In addition to the anthem tryouts, Mark has tried out to be a public address announcer for the Legends for the past two years. He didn't make it. But then for years Alan had no success in bringing a professional baseball team to town. He didn't give up. And neither will Mark. Mark does not say he failed as an announcer, just that he did not make it.

"Not yet," says Frieda.

"Not yet," echoes Kathy.

"Not yet, but he could show you the scar," continues Frieda.

She isn't kidding about the scar—or about making Mark reveal it. It turns out that while driving to the PA announcer auditions last year, Mark was in a car accident. He ended up with a steel plate in his left shoulder. After he was released from the emergency room, he went to Applebee's Park to audition. The tryouts had long since ended, but the Legends staff agreed to hear him out. Their sympathy extended only so far, though, because Mark didn't make the cut.

The cut in his left shoulder left a "nice" scar, Frieda says, pulling back her husband's blue polo shirt. "It was a heck of a wreck." Mark isn't sure if the Legends are holding PA announcer auditions this year. "And if they do, I may not let him [go]," says Frieda.

"Or drive him anyway," adds Kathy.

They share a laugh, and then Frieda gets serious, pulling the group together and leading them toward the stage, four middle-aged men and women in black dress pants and blue polo shirts. They are the first to perform, and they are good—so good you almost forget the whole thing is taking place in the walkway between Payless Shoe Source and Caramel Carnival snack store.

The afternoon stretches on, and countless others belt out the anthem. There is a young man whose voice breaks part-way through. He doesn't bother finishing, just steps down and disappears into the Sunday mall traffic. There is a teenage girl whose high is so high little kids passing by on the way to Dick's Sporting Goods cover their ears and scrunch their faces. Then there are those who sing so beautifully that even though you have heard dozens of anthems in the past few hours, you stop and listen. Those are the ones Alan, one of several people judging the event, awards straight tens. Then he leans back in his chair and listens. They are the ones who cause a young couple to stop midstride, grasp hands, and watch.

Dorsey Franklin isn't quite one of them. But she is something. Dressed in a sailor costume, with blonde hair and a voice far bigger than you expect from a nine-year-old, she is an audience favorite. And she seems to know it. Her rendition is not perfect, but it is hard to ignore, with her tight white pants, tasseled top, Orphan Annie pipes, and matching hand gestures.

Offstage her mother, Lucille, holds Dorsey's monogrammed pink bags. Dorsey has been singing since she was six and has been practicing the anthem with her voice coach for the past three weeks. "We really should have taken longer, I think, but we didn't know about it in time," says Lucille. They heard about the tryouts from a friend. And for three weeks' practice, both mother and daughter are pleased with the results, pleased enough

they may stop by Dorsey's favorite restaurant, Golden Corral, on the way home.

At the judge's table Alan also seems happy. And not just with Dorsey's performance. This is the second and last day of tryouts, and all of the two hundred audition spots have been filled. When Alan showed up a half hour before the day's events were set to begin, an employee complained that she couldn't accommodate all the people showing up without appointments. Alan smiled, unfazed. They have seventy home games, with a different national anthem singer at each game, but the tryouts are about more than just finding singers. They are about being able to "touch the community," generating excitement for the club, and, of course, providing entertainment.

It's the reason behind pretty much everything he does, because Alan Stein is the Legends, from the burly mascot with the handlebar mustache, not unlike Alan's own mustache, to the design of the stadium and the preseason gimmicks. It all comes out of Alan's head. And now, ten years after it all began, he is still the guy behind professional baseball in Lexington. "The guy everybody said couldn't have baseball in town, couldn't do it without public money" is how the announcer introduces Alan at the auditions.

Whether you like him or not, and most like him, pretty much everyone agrees Alan is the reason the Legends are in Lexington. And he isn't shy about telling you the story of how he got them here. It is a story as entertaining as the sport he promotes, because if Alan understands one thing, it is that Minor League Baseball is about entertainment.

But before the story of the Legends is the story of Alan. He takes his time telling it, speaking slowly so you don't miss a word. He starts with his paternal grandparents, who hail from Lithu-

ania. From there he moves to his father, a World War II veteran with an entrepreneurial spirit that led him to the restaurant, barbecue wholesale, and construction businesses, among others.

The oldest of five, Alan grew up working in the family restaurant. But he didn't just work with what his father had started. He had his own projects as well. The first was a bar near the University of Kentucky, located in downtown Lexington. As a student at UK, Alan had noticed that there were plenty of places to get a beer around campus, but few where you could find a cocktail. So he opened one and called it 803 South. After that there was real estate, radio, and, finally, baseball.

"Alan's very visionary," said his sister, Teri Stein Harper. "He can see things others cannot."

In the 1980s when Alan read about talk of a Major League Baseball expansion, which would probably mean an expansion for Minor League Baseball as well, he saw it as an opportunity to bring the sport to his hometown. So he started an advocacy group devoted to just that.

There had been professional baseball in Lexington before. The city had a team in the Blue Grass League from the league's inception in 1908 to its demise following the 1912 season.¹ The league started as an independent league but joined the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues in 1909 and was designated a Minor League Class-D League—out of A, B, C, or D, based on the city's population. In 1913 the team joined the Ohio State League, also Class-D, and stayed with it until that league disbanded in 1916. Tough times followed for the world, and Minor League Baseball and professional baseball did not return to Lexington until 1922, when the Blue Grass League was revived and Lexington joined once again, playing in it until 1924. Lexington had a team in the Kentucky-Illinois-Tennessee

(better known as KITTY) League Class-D level from 1935 to 1938 and in 1954 played one season in the Mountain States League, which at the time was a Class-C level.²

But for much of recent history there was no professional baseball in Lexington. Bringing it back was the sort of thing many dreamed of, the kind of thing older successful businessmen talk about when they have time and cash to spare. The only difference is that Alan stuck it out for more than a decade to make sure it came true. There were those who said it couldn't be done, those who figured he would give up. Then there were those who knew Alan.

“He was the one guy willing to just kind of drive through all that junk, all the naysayers saying you can't do it,” explained Chuck Mraz, news director of nearby Morehead State Public Radio. “He said, ‘To heck with that, we're gonna do it.’”

And he did. Sitting in an old storage area that has been converted into his office at Applebee's Park, Alan is in his element. The baseball caps he has collected over the years decorate his high office walls, photos of famous players posing with his family rest on his desk, and a Cracker Jack box sits in a planter. When his phone rings he takes the calls reluctantly, drumming his fingers on his desk impatiently, holding the phone away from his head dramatically and repeating, “Right, yeah, right, yeah, right, yep, yep . . .”

The baseball field has become Alan's stage. While he says he leaves a lot to his general manager, Andy Shea, he has yet to exit the theater. It isn't the role he imagined himself playing as a child. Back then, like so many other little boys, he wanted to be a baseball player. But in a way his role now is even better, because he is a player on a higher level. He may not ever be the guy to score the winning run, or pitch the perfect game for the

Legends, but he knows without him, there probably wouldn't be a Legends team.

It's not that Kentucky's second-largest city isn't a sports town. It is—there is University of Kentucky basketball and University of Kentucky football, in that order. Fans and most residents take both seriously, which means during March, not a lot gets done around there. Then there is horse racing. Lexington sits deep in horse country, rolling hills with white and black fences behind which run thoroughbreds and blue bloods.

Before becoming president of a baseball team, Alan was president of a local synagogue and estimates the Jewish population to number about a thousand or so in a city of nearly three hundred thousand. But religion was never a problem. Government was—at least that's how Alan tells it. Never mind the fact that his wife, Kathy, is a state senator.

In the years after Alan formed his advocacy group, several important steps were taken to bring professional baseball to Kentucky. In the late 1980s the mayor and city council were approached about building the stadium needed for a Minor League team. In 1991 the commissioner of Major League Baseball, Faye Vincent, paid the city a visit. In 1996 Lexington was pitched as a potential Minor League franchise location. Nothing happened. Meanwhile, in other states around the nation, cities and counties were building new stadiums. Alan and his partners continued to push the city for support, believing Lexington would be like other communities where the government took the lead in getting a stadium built. "And that just didn't happen here," says Alan.

At least three times the public was told Lexington was going to get a team, but each time public funding for a new stadium fell through. Even a state surplus that resulted in a number of statewide capital projects did not help secure the \$12 million or

so needed. Alan explains, without bitterness, that Kathy was a member of the state legislature that did not vote to prioritize a baseball stadium for use of the funds. As he sees it, either Lexington was a leader in refusing to fund the stadium, or “you could say they missed the boat.” Either way, by the late 1990s he knew if there was going to be a baseball stadium, he was going to have to find another way to fund it.

He had no doubt that the venture would be profitable. When the spring horse racing meet at Keeneland and UK basketball end, there isn’t much going on until UK football starts in the fall. Plus, there is no riverfront or lakefront in Lexington, all of which in Alan’s mind added up to no real competition. He also had the time and money to work on the project, having sold his radio stations in 1998. So he decided to fund the project privately, becoming one of the first fully privately funded stadiums that relied on individuals, not a foundation.

Of course, it wasn’t easy. For a while even Alan didn’t think he could do it. For a AA team in the Southern Franchise, they would need to build a stadium with at least six thousand seats and pay \$7.5 million in franchise costs. They didn’t have the money.

But when Alan’s then seven-year-old son, Scooter, challenged him to do the math, he started thinking. He couldn’t afford a AA team, but a Class-A team was another story, with a stadium that required only four thousand seats and franchise costs of \$3.5 million.

All of a sudden, Alan’s business model worked. The problem was that everyone kept telling him people in Lexington wouldn’t support a Class-A team; they would only watch a AA team that played against teams from similar-size cities. Plus, if they were AA, they had a chance of being an affiliate of the nearby Major League Cincinnati Reds.

Alan didn't think people cared. To prove it he and his team surveyed spectators at other Minor League facilities, mainly the AA Southern League franchise in Chattanooga, Tennessee. What they found was that 52 percent of people coming out of the games "didn't give a damn about who won the game; 52 percent didn't even know the score of the games," says Alan. More than 60 percent did not know what level of baseball they had just seen, with some offering some pretty crazy answers, like Japanese League, Little League, and even Major League. As for Major League affiliation, 70-some percent didn't know who the team was affiliated with. But 98 percent did know they had a good time and would come back. When asked why, their answers had less to do with baseball than with economics and convenience—in other words, it was cheap, clean, and convenient fun.

All of which gave Alan enough fuel to talk twenty-two different investors into forking over about \$12 million. The first man he got on board was his good friend Billy Forbess. A Lexington dentist, Billy didn't have much faith in the project. He was not even a baseball fan. But he was an "Alan fan," and from day one he has had season tickets right beside Alan. "I know he has a hundred best friends, but he's my best friend," said Billy. Alan's ability to make everybody feel like his best friend is one of the things that makes him such a successful businessman, said Billy. And Billy insisted with Alan that it is sincere, not some sleazy salesman trick. He has known Alan more than thirty-five years and has seen him make financial sacrifices in order to protect other businessmen.

After Billy others followed. The biggest investor was Brad Redmon, a successful local entrepreneur who put in about \$5 million. Alan was the second-largest investor, with about \$1.5 million. They still needed about \$10 million more. And no big banks wanted to take the risk.

The Bank of Lexington isn't big. It is a small local bank that did not have the kind of money Alan and his partners needed. But it could be the lead bank of a consortium of smaller banks, and that's what happened. The Bank of Lexington put together eleven little banks that together could lend the money. "So that was it. That's how we got it done," Alan says.

But he isn't done. There are a lot more tales to tell, and the calls coming into his office are dismissed quickly. A large man with a cut-to-the-chase manner, Alan can appear intimidating, until he starts talking about himself. Then he is just a well-dressed fifty-eight-year-old reminiscing about the biggest adventure of his life, an adventure that in the beginning felt a lot like the "Wild, Wild West," he says. "There were plenty of times along the way when I said to myself, 'I don't know how I'm going to make this next construction draw tomorrow. Where am I going to get \$600,000 tomorrow?' you know."

Contractors threatened to stop work, but all the time the group kept selling tickets and advertising. In February 2000, fifteen months before they would play their first game, in a stadium that wasn't built, for a team they didn't own yet, to a league that they didn't belong, they started selling season tickets. They sold almost two thousand on the first day. And they weren't just selling for the first season. One of the conditions of their loan was that season-ticket holders, sponsors, and advertisers had to commit for a minimum of three years. The Legends tried to extend things even more by offering discounts for even longer commitments, which many took them up on. The founding corporate sponsors signed on for ten years. It wasn't a hard sell. "We spent so much effort and energy on creating this dream that it became a community dream," Alan says. "It wasn't just mine. Everybody was on board."

These long-term investments ensured not only that the venture would live past the excitement of the “honeymoon” first season, but that it would survive in general. You see, the League Championship Series in which the Legends were supposed to play was canceled following the September 11, 2001, attacks. While the rest of the nation was struggling in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the Legends actually saw their revenues go up in 2002, because everything was already locked in and anything sold beyond that was a plus, says Alan. And they sold beyond that. Alan is not content to coast on any early success; he stands in the spotlight drawing attention to his team.

The first year it was cat food. The season opener that year was against the Alley Cats in Charleston, West Virginia. Talking trash before the game, Alan guaranteed the Legends would win or he would eat cat food. The press loved it, especially when the Legends lost and they got photos of the team president eating cat food. Alan can't recall exactly how much he shoveled down, or whether it was dry or wet—he thinks he ate about a can of the dry stuff—but there is no forgetting the attention the whole episode generated. And for him that is what counts; what he has to go through is irrelevant, so long as it benefits the team.

“I mean, he's willing to go the extra mile even though it might prove to be a little bit personally disastrous. It always works out well from a PR standpoint,” said Chuck Mraz of Morehead State Public Radio.

The cat food stunt was the best advertising the Legends never paid for, so the following year Alan decided to do something again, this time before the Legends' first home game. Back then his hair was long and bushy, so he decided he would guarantee a win or he would shave his head. Of course, they lost, and Alan lost his hair. Well, kind of. “I still have the hair right here,” he

says, pulling a plastic bag filled with brown hair from his desk. He keeps the hair as a reminder of all the fun he had as a bald man. His shaved head generated so much interest that he started charging advertisers to have their logos painted on it. The first night he charged one hundred dollars; by the fourth, and last, night, he was up to eight hundred. Ten years later people still stop him on the street and comment on how his hair has grown back.

The third year's stunt went even further, and almost cost him his marriage. He had just undergone major surgery for colon cancer a few weeks before opening night and guaranteed the team would win or he would sit in his seat, section 207, row 6, seat 12, until they did. He was allowed to leave to go to the bathroom, but that was it. "I thought my wife was going to divorce me, to tell you the truth, and my doctor was going to shoot me," he says.

They lost the first night, which was okay, because it was about seventy-four degrees and a large fan base supplied Alan with food and soft drinks. The next night, they lost again and a cold front came through, bringing with it gusting winds and hail. A local outdoor outfitter brought Alan a tent and sleeping bag. In the morning, radio and television station weather helicopters circled the park to show that Alan was still there, and the *Lexington Herald-Leader* newspaper got a picture of Alan waking up. "He waited an hour until I woke up so he could take a photograph as soon as I opened my eyes. It made front page," laughs Alan.

He calculates that the stunt probably brought in about five hundred thousand dollars in free media. The third night the weather was miserable again, and the Legends were behind by three runs in the bottom of the ninth with two outs and nobody on. Then they got a hit, followed by another hit, and things started to turn around, with the Legends pulling through for a win. It was their only win that home stand.

Alan ended up back in the hospital. But that, he smiles, is another story, and does not matter. His wife, Kathy, sees it a little differently. “I tried to get him to come in,” she said. “He wouldn’t.” He was recovering from cancer treatment, she added, and for anyone else that would be explanation enough. Not for Alan. She knows that now, knows not to even try to change him. But she is still his wife, and she still worries. “To see him work so hard,” she said. “He really just puts his nose to the grindstone, starting fifteen years ago, and he continues to do it.”

He has fun, of course. At least he makes sure it looks like he is having fun, but being an entertainer is hard work. The year after the bleachers stint, he came up with a new plan. After three years of losing his bets, he decided to blame the losses on the bat boy and promised fans that if the team lost the home opener, he would take over the bat boy’s duties until they won. Of course, they lost, which, Alan is quick to add, was great in those days. Fans love a win, but they also love seeing the team president make a fool of himself. As a bat boy he donned the uniform, but instead of resting on a bucket, he lounged on a Barcalounger reclining chair.

He did that for two nights. Eventually, the Legends started winning their home openers, saving Alan and his general manger from wearing Batman and Robin costumes, among other humiliations. Then they won a few more, and Alan let front-office general manager Andy Shea choose the gimmicks. Those weren’t quite as outlandish, according to Alan, so this year Alan is back in full form, offering to shave his distinctive white mustache if the Legends lose their home opener. Kathy didn’t have much to say on that one. She has learned not to interfere. “He is his own man,” she said. But she crossed her fingers it wouldn’t happen. She has never seen him without a mustache and didn’t really want to experience that.

The national anthem auditions are another crowd pleaser the Legends put on every year. The first few years they took place over three days, lasted twenty hours, and drew as many as six hundred people. Now the Legends office staff spends two days and a total of six hours listening to about two hundred performers. Out of those they will choose fewer than seventy, leaving some spots open for celebrities and other surprise appearances.

The judging is left to a panel consisting of the team's media sponsors and a representative from the team, which this year is Alan. The whole thing is so Alan, it would almost feel as if something was missing if he wasn't there. Each judge is given a sheet on which they rate performances based on lyrical accuracy, vocal quality, presentation, voice projection, and overall performance. Then there are what Alan calls the intangibles; little kids, instrumentals, and big groups of kids always score high with audiences and thus also with Alan.

Whether they make it or not, every contestant will receive a thank-you letter. Those who make it will be given a list of dates to choose from on which to perform. Those who don't will be given a voucher for two tickets to a Legends game.

Jonathan Hagee got the tickets last year. He came in regular clothes. This year, the fifty-two-year-old software project manager looks like a pilgrim dressed in colonial reenactor garb, complete with knee socks and buckle shoes. When he got a call from the Legends asking him to return this year, he decided to go all out and don his reenactor garb. It seems to have worked, for after his performance Alan pulls Jonathan aside and tells him if he gets picked to wear what he is wearing. Still, the anthem is difficult and a departure from what he usually does—traditional Irish and Scottish ballads. "But everyone knows this song, right?" Jonathan says. "It's just converting what's in your head to your voice."

Or in Miles Osland's case, it is converting it to your saxophone. The director of jazz studies and a professor of saxophone at UK, Miles has performed annually at a Legends game since they have been around. He also does UK football and basketball games. He doesn't do it for the money, he jokes, because there isn't any. He does it because if your name is Miles, then you'd better play sax. Playing it at a Minor League Baseball game is bound to draw exposure to the musical program where you work. One of Miles's students taught Alan's son Scooter in high school. Scooter was doing well, he says. "I was sorry to see him give it up."

Miles believes that the anthem contestants have improved over the years. Luckily, not all care enough to keep their appointments, which means one little girl and her father will go home happy. The pair arrived early, but not nearly early enough. They hadn't registered in advance, and there were no openings left. But they signed onto the waiting list and sat side by side for several hours, waiting to see if they would be called.

The little girl is about eight and dressed in winter boots and leggings. When she gets word she will get to perform, she smiles and takes the stage without her father. She clasps the microphone tightly in both hands and starts off in a sweet voice that doesn't quite carry. When she stumbles over a word, a hand flies to her mouth. But she doesn't let that stop her, just gives a little smile and continues. She is a wisp of a thing with a pretty voice and a sweet, unpolished image. When she finishes, the crowd erupts in cheers. She smiles, glides off the stage, and runs into the waiting arms of her father.