

HOME RUNS

& Hot Dogs



Kalamazoo Growlers Return for Second Season



Growlers' home opener is Friday, May 29, against the Bombers.

While there's plenty of on-field action from late May to mid-August, Bollinger said the Growlers want to have something for everyone, even those who don't like watching baseball. Players stay after each game to sign autographs and kids are let on the diamond to run the bases during the seventh-inning stretch. Like many smaller baseball clubs, the Growlers

You might remember other teams from Kalamazoo, like the Kings, who played from 2001 to 2010, and the Kalamazoo Kodiaks in the late 1990s. Teams without the high profile — and money — of major league sports are notorious for brief stints with host cities, folding after just a few seasons or moving to another city entirely. Bollinger said that's not the case for the Growlers. For one thing, the owners of the Growlers also own the Battle Creek Bombers, a team in its eighth season there, so they have experience in bringing successful entertainment to southwest Michigan.

After a long, cold winter in southwest Michigan, the Kalamazoo Growlers are stepping up to the plate for their second season of baseball at Homer Stryker Field. This year there will be plenty of home runs and fly balls, but you'll find more at the park than ever before.

"We love our hard core baseball fans, the statistics fans, but for us, it's all about the experience," said John Bollinger, assistant general manager for the team.

The Growlers are members of the Northwoods League, made up of teams from the upper Midwest (mostly Minnesota and Wisconsin, though there's also the Battle Creek Bombers, the other Northwoods team in Michigan). Players are college-age, keeping their skills sharp between seasons with the baseball team at whichever university they attend. Local families open their homes to the players during the season.

They don't have a formal affiliation with any professional baseball team, like the Toledo Mud Hens do with the Detroit Tigers, but Bollinger said a handful of pro scouts are at nearly every Growlers game.

Last year was the team's first season. The second season kicks off May 26 with an away game; the

have theme nights: there's Fireworks Fridays, and Family Funday Sunday. This season there will be an "outdoorsman night," and a "superhero night," where fans will receive a team bobblehead complete with super-costume and cape. It's one of six bobbleheads to be given this season.

"Come one time, and this will be one of the main staples for your summer entertainment," Bollinger said.

Six bobbleheads and four live acts (including Bucket Ruckus, a "Stomp"-like group of musicians) doubles what the Growlers offered fans last season. The team is also offering more food choices, including barbecue and new frying machines.

"You can fry anything," Bollinger said. "There might be some wacky items there."

Rachel Fuller, marketing manager for the Growlers, said the popularity of the team in its first season encouraged them to add more off-field fun. "We have 10,000 fans on Facebook," Fuller said. "It shows the community is behind us."

Bollinger said the Growlers had the best turnout for any Northwoods League team in its inaugural season, more than 80,000 visitors. He didn't have exact figures, but said pre-sales for the 2015 season "have been doing well."



"As long as we keep improving the experience, we'll be here," Bollinger said.

One piece of controversy touched the Growlers in their first season: the team mascot, a big blue bear called Barlee, ran into trouble when another team in another league laid claim to the name. The solution is simple, Bollinger said: Barlee will move to the big leagues, and his "brother" will join the Growlers for this season. Fans voted on the mascot's new name, Porter, which was announced March 7.



Andrew Domino grew up watching the Detroit Tigers, and he'll be at Kalamazoo Growlers games this summer. He also wants to collect all the bobbleheads he can. You can find more of his writing at www.dominowriting.com.