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## THE BOYS OF SUMMER—AND THEIR FAMILIES

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“When you come to the Blues you know three things; you are going to have great coaches, a fun time, and your gonna walk away with friendships that last forever.” Ryan Aguayo has spent the past three summers playing shortstop for the The San Luis Obispo Blues, a summer collegiate team.

Each year a new group of players descends on San Luis Obispo from all corners of the country. With wooden bats in-hand and a rigorous game schedule ahead, these young athletes are given a unique opportunity that will forever shape their lives as they forge a bond with their new families, their teammates, and their host city.

The tradition of navy blue and gold has been around officially since '46, but a black and white framed picture hanging on the office wall of Jim Galusha, proud Blues owner, says the team has been around since the early 1900's

The Blues are in the California Collegiate League, which allows some of the top college players in the nation to keep their skills sharp during their summer offseason. The league is highly regarded by Major League scouts - it is not uncommon to spot one at a game - and a significant percentage of the players will be drafted after graduating from their respective schools. The league will give the boys a taste for what it's like to play in the minors, which generally are made up of three different class levels of “farm leagues” that feed into the Major Leagues. And, like minor league baseball, crowd participation and interaction is just as much a part of the experience as the game itself. Between each inning the Blues provide entertainment and the atmosphere becomes carnival-like as young fans are invited down to the field for such games as the “dizzy bat race” and the “foot loose frenzy.” The Blues players can be seen taking turns supervising the children's extra-curricular activities, as well as raking and preparing the infield between innings.

Aguayo has been playing ball since he was five years old. With competition and success on the forefront of his mind, the Blues have given him a little piece of his childhood passion back. “We had the opportunity to coach kids at a summer camp. Being with them and watching them play and laugh reminded me why I still play ball today—“

Baseball has played an important role in Aguayo's life, but since he is under the average size of a ball player, he has had to work hard to find an edge in his game. “You need to be tall, you need to be fast, and you need to have power—and I'm none of those.” For Aguayo each game means playing not just for himself but also for the entire team. Aguayo's voice swells with pride as he sketches out his most

memorable games with the Blues. He will graduate this summer and is anxiously awaiting news from the Major League draft where he is considered a long shot. If he goes undrafted, he hopes to return again this year to the Blues, not as a player, but as a coach.

If Aguayo does end up making the transition from player to coach this year, he can count on learning the craft from someone who is widely regarded as one of the best around. By all accounts, Coach Chal Fanning works the boys hard and expects them to be a cohesive unit very quickly. With only 59 days to play 52 games there is little time to spare. But Fanning knows that coming to play summer ball is not just about the games, not just about being on the field everyday - there is something bigger than hitting a baseball. He sees possibility in their youth and finds promise in them as individuals. "The most rewarding thing for me is to see a player grow. Watch them move down a developmental path and grow from boys to men."

When the Blues play a game at Sinsheimer stadium the stands fill up with people. It's the details on the field; the strikes thrown, the great plays, and the homeruns scored, that everyone comes to watch. But if for a second, you were to shift your attention, you might notice a supporting cast of families, who prepared for the unknown and opened up their homes so that each one of these boys could live their dream of being the world's greatest ball player.

With no obligation other than to provide players with a place to sleep, the host families truly become a part of the boy's lives. "When you go to a Major League game you just care if your team wins, but with the Blues you care about the individual players—how they did that night, win or lose."

Jon and Leslie Goetz finish each other's sentences - as only a husband and wife can—as they excitedly share their experience with the Blues organization. But what captured my imagination is Jon's perspective on the game. "Baseball is a slower game, more of a thinking persons game—more of a cerebral game. Its nice to see the players at this age transition from physical to thinking." With no time restraints or game clock, the players rely on intellect and strategy.

Leslie is more succinct, "A Blues game is just fun. You have the announcers going, and raffles going. It's just a lot of fun."

The intergeneration camaraderie among the people involved reminds us why baseball is such a rich tradition in America. The Blues brings life and new meaning to the game. For the host families it means giving a young dreamer a home to succeed. Susie Gill will be going on her third year as a host mom. A huge smile spread across her face as she explained the impact the boys have had on her life. "Its so much fun, it puts a lot of life back into my life because all my kids are all grown up and so its just me and the dogs."

There is something about the Blues that puts a smile on anyone's face who has been to a game. Perhaps it is the incredible teamwork that builds in just a few short months. Or families blindly opening their doors and sharing the intimacy of their lives with a total stranger. Or maybe it's watching these college ball players stand on the field, regally wearing the same uniforms that have been passed along from those before them. Each year a new group of players come from all over the United States. With wooden bats, a rigorous game schedule, and a new town to explore, these young athletes are given an opportunity that will forever shape their lives.

Nothing authenticates the essence of baseball better than The Blues, when the boys of summer and their families come together and knock another summer out of the ballpark.