

24 Hours in Toledo

SOFTBALL GAME [5 TO 6 P.M.]

Springtime and spirit: Scott softball team takes the field

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The blue sky is dotted with cotton candy clouds, songbirds are rejoicing, and the cold finally has been chased away. It must be time to play ball.

Except for one thing: No one brought the bases.

So instead of giving a last-minute pep talk to her players, Scott High School Softball Coach Debra Jones is driving a white minivan at 5 p.m. to pick up bases from another park.

This game at Robinson Park against Rogers High School will be the home opener for the Scott Bulldogs. The squad is 0-2 so far this season, coming off a year in which they racked up three wins — a losing season, yes, but also the first time in seven years the varsity team managed a win.

Today's starting pitcher, senior Ashlyn Smith, 17, hopes to continue that positive momentum.

"I feel like if I do my job ... everybody else will just follow along with me and we can keep on winning," says the young woman who's been playing since she was 7.

In their coach's absence, the girls are loose. Ashlyn helps one of them do a handstand near the bleachers. Some form a circle and sing "Rockin' Robin" as they clap each other's hands.

At the edge of the action is Evelyn "Mama Yancey" Willis, a former semi-pro player here to see two granddaughters, including Ashlyn. At 61, she's not about to take the field with these young'uns, but she'd like to.

"I'm too old," she says. "I can't run this field like I used to, but I can tell them something."

MULTIMEDIA

[See and hear more about the Scott softball team between 5 and 6 p.m.](#)

And she will — loudly and with much vigor — once the game starts. For now, she sits on the bleachers in her sandals and socks and long black coat with Ashlyn's mother, April Hull, and talks about the good old days.

"When I came up, we didn't have softballs and bats. We played with sticks and stones in the driveways, in the street," she says. "And I used to be a little tomboy. And I used to get out there with the boys and play ball. I could out-hit them and I could outrun them."

Eventually, Ms. Jones returns with bases and the team throws the fluorescent yellow balls around the field a bit before starting the game.

"Dogs on three," someone shouts as the Scott team gathers in a tight circle, hands in the center. "1-2-3-Dogs!"

A bespectacled Ashlyn takes the mound dressed in her school's maroon-colored jersey. She stands calm and tosses a few warm-up balls before facing a Rogers team clad in bright red. Then it's time.

Her first pitch is a ball, followed by a strike, then another ball.

There are more than 20 parents and fans on the Scott side, most of them standing, as the first batter hits a double to center field. A crowd of younger spectators wander around behind the backstop.



A batter for Scott High School takes a swing in the team's first home game of the season. (THE BLADE/ERIC SUMBERG)

There's so much to watch, and only part of it on the field.

There's Ashlyn, furiously whipping her right arm around before delivering pitch after pitch.

There's her coach shouting out instructions from behind the backstop and her teammates — some of them freshmen playing in place of veterans who are out on vacation — holding things together despite a dropped ball here, a misplayed ball there.

There's her grandma, offering running commentary and calling an outfielder over to her in between innings, demanding, "How'd you miss that ball?"

By the time 6 p.m. rolls near, it's only the third inning. The score is 2-0 with Rogers leading. A few more people from the neighborhood have trickled in to check things out.

Runners are at first and third. One out.

Ashlyn looks in to the catcher.

She doesn't know about the rally by Scott that is to come, or the heartbreaking errors that will follow, leading to a lopsided 13-6 Bulldog loss.

She just knows that at this critical moment, the game is still within reach.

So she stares ahead, grips the ball, windmills her arm around a couple of times ...

And lets it fly.

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