

The next step in Jonathon Blum's career is nothing compared to the tests he has fa

By all accounts, the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains southeast of Los Angeles are a good place to live and raise a family.

The weather is spectacular, the crime rate low, the Pacific Ocean near and life prosperous enough for bucolic, planned communities like Rancho Santa Margarita to sprout like ideals in the brown, grassy hills.

There are, however, the Santa Ana winds to withstand — hot, miserable gales that rush annually out of the great deserts to the east and through the parched mountain passes of Southern California, overpowering the gentler winds off the Pacific and sparking dust storms, wildfires and, legend has it, earthquakes.

Many there believe the real name for the winds is Santanas, a spinoff of the Spanish word for devil.

In his 1938 short story *Red Wind*, author Raymond Chandler described the Santa Anas as "...those hot dry [winds] that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and



IAIN MacINTYRE
VANCOUVER SUN

COLUMNIST

make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything can happen."

Still, the winds are a small price for living there. John Blum and his family have paid much more.

For two years, the Blums must have felt like they were leaning into those relentless winds, struggling to hang on to each other and stay upright even on

the many days and nights when the air was still above Rancho Santa Margarita.

Three years ago, the Blums lost one of their four children, 15-year-old Ashley, in a house fire caused by a gas leak. And a year later, with the family's grief still raw and Ashley's twin brother Jonathon contemplating a move to Canada to play junior hockey for the Vancouver Giants, John's wife Dana was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

"No one in my family is a quitter," John Blum says on the telephone. "Everyone stuck together and we just kept moving forward. When we first heard about Ashley, there was shock and horror. But it might have made us become even closer as a family."

This week, finally, mercifully, the Blum family has much to celebrate.

Jonathon Blum has beaten the odds, and so has Dana.

In Columbus, Ohio, where usually — unlike the Santa Anas — nothing happens, Jonathon, 18, is expected to be the first kid from California chosen in the opening round of the National Hockey

League draft. A for a year, will b ily of 14 extend tives, includin mother.

"A little bit of ily," Dana descr been lifted off c things are happ

Jonathon is While most b play baseball on and just go sur wanted was to brother Danie hood's ace roll most days the c Blum house tee ey.

"We set up m games," Jonath these big hocke be a couple of fi still hang out ar

See COM

Natty at the Nat: Revamped stadium a hit

Canadians fans give rave reviews on opening night

BY LYNDON LITTLE
VANCOUVER SUN

BASEBALL | Nat Bailey Stadium officially turned 56 three days ago, and never has there been more to celebrate.

After years of semi-neglect, suddenly everything old is new again. The old dowager Queen of ballparks at the foot of Queen Eliza-

beth Park has never looked better. Somebody has finally shelled out to give the old lady a facelift.

The Single A Vancouver Canadians of the Northwest League opened their 2007 season Tuesday night against the Tri-City Dust Devils, and there was plenty of head-turning as fans filed into the park, which opened as Capilano Stadium on June 15, 1951.

"It's wonderful," said Jean Elgoud, who lives in False Creek and has been an usher at the park since 1999. "The thing I like best is the way the concourse has been improved."

"I almost didn't recognize the place, even from the outside," added Bud Kerr of Richmond, who was also in attendance in '51 when the Capilanos of the Western International League played the park's first game against Salem, Ore.

"It's beautiful," offered Wilber Reed, a 68-year-old Saskatchewan native who has been a regular at The Nat for years. "The only problem, as I see it, is that the parking has been relocated behind the outfield fences [due to Olympic construction at the new Hillcrest curling facility.] It makes it tough for

people like me who have bad knees."

Among the changes:

■ A completely renovated concourse area that improved access to the food concessions and gives the interior of the stadium a fresh, modern look;

■ The bringing in of the outfield fences, particularly in centre, by a distance of approximately 15 feet. The distance down the lines stays the same at 335 feet, but straight-away centre is now 380.

See **CLUB'S SALE** E4

C's lose opener to Dust Devils, Page E5

Sh

ant to get
all doesn't
spent the
Bishop's,
the confer-
in Quebec
to the CFL

bouncing his first snap, he
calmed down and hit a groove
for the next five.
"I was pretty down after the
draft was finished and I didn't
get picked up," said McCullough,
who signed with the
Lions as a priority free agent.

CFL's outstanding defensive
player and outstanding Canadian
last season. "He's a steal.
Our scouting guys stole him. A
lot of the time with a rookie,
they want to do everything and
make every tackle and that's
not always a good thing. He

"I don't think of it as pressure,
more like motivation," he
said. "It's possible. It just may
not come the way you envision."
Spoken like a guy who
knows.

iwalker@png.canwest.com

(NFL) teams and nothing happened.
Morley said. "So, I said, 'I'm not going
to wait any longer and sign now.'"
Morley, 25, is a former first-overall
selection in the CFL draft (2003) who
played seven games with the New
York Jets in 2005.

CanWest News Service



SEASON TICKETS
6
0
4
589-ROAR

bclions.com

Club's sale to local owners kick-started changes

From E1

There were only seven homers
hit at The Nat in the last entire
NWL season;

- The relocation of the scoreboard from centre field to left centre and lowered to field level with a new balls-and-strikes counter;

- The replacing of the old chain-link fencing that protected the fans from foul balls. It's been replaced — and scaled back along both lines — by lighter, more see-through netting;

- Improvements to the mound area and infield.

- A change in the park's exterior colour scheme from blue to two different shades of grey along with 17 giant posters of former baseball greats painted by local artist and ball fan Jennifer Ettinger.

It was the the sale of the club from Medford, Ore., resident Fred Herrmann to local businessmen Jeff Mooney and Jake Kerr that sparked the upgrades. As part of the deal, they worked out a 25-year lease on the stadium with the Vancouver Parks and Recreation Board that included an agreement to spend some money on improvements. In the first phase, the new owners were to spend \$500,000 — which they have already exceeded — while the city would match that amount. If a



STEVE BOSCH/VANCOUVER SUN

**Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan
threw out the first pitch Tuesday.**

future city referendum passes, the second phase will call for an extra \$2 million from both sides.

"In fairness to the previous owner, he never had more than a one-year lease to work on," said Kerr, who heads up Lignum investments.

Asked to name the improvement he's most proud of, Mooney, the president of A&W Canada, said: "Probably the better netting around home plate. I was in PNG Park in Pittsburgh last week and, even though it's a major league park, it had an intimate feel because the netting is so good. The Nat is intimate to begin with, but the new netting should make it even more so."

little@png.canwest.com

New franchise will have capital

From E1

The franchise's first three years were marked by continuous fretting over making payroll and road trips. After initial owner David Stadnyk pulled out before a game was ever played, Mayenknecht convinced ex-NHLer Paul Reinhart to come aboard. Reinhart, after ousting Mayenknecht following the inaugural season, then abandoned the franchise midway through Year 2.

In the summer of 2004, the NLL

directed an Atlanta-based group to Mayenknecht, but the principals bailed that fall before completing the ownership transfer.

Whitsitt said the new ownership plan will give the franchise the one major ingredient it was missing the last three times around — capital to succeed.

"We've put together a business plan with a long-term view," said Whitsitt, who added his group intended at first to put a team in Seattle, but couldn't work it out so turned its efforts north.

iwalker@png.canwest.com