

# Longtime staffers take pride in success

Game-day workers take pride in helping make baseball work in Dayton.

By Sean McClelland  
Staff Writer

DAYTON — Ron Kraus, an usher at Fifth Third Field, is one of 26 game-day staff members who have been with the Dayton Dragons since they opened for business in 2000. Sometimes he can be found on the suite level, other times near the front entrance.

Hardly a minute goes by when Kraus isn't talking to someone.

Usually it's a fan, but often it's a colleague, an umpire, the visiting team's bus driver or even a Cincinnati Reds legend.

Of all the games he's worked and all the nights he's spent at the ballpark, Kraus most fondly remembers the time when Tom Browning got a little carried away when talking about the perfect game he pitched in 1988.

"He played it back for us, pitch-by-pitch, for almost 40 minutes," Kraus said, smiling at the memory. "We couldn't get a word in. It was interesting, but at the same time it was humorous.

"The more he talked, the more people would sit around and listen."

With the Dragons set to eclipse the Portland Trail Blazers' record of 814 consecutive professional sports sellouts Saturday, ushers such as Kraus are taking pride in the roles they have played, helping the team make customer service a priority.

The ushers are retirees, mainly. Jerry Miller estimates he has missed fewer than 10 games in 11½ seasons. Kettering resident Harry Winkelmann appreciates being stationed on the first-base side every night because he enjoys interacting with the same fans. For Penny Brannon, it's just the opposite. She favors working on one of the three party decks because she likes meeting differ-

ent people each night, then recognizing them when they come back, years later in some cases.

Lee Howard, meanwhile, said he just likes "to see a good game." And he wouldn't trade his spot behind home plate, because that's where celebrities such as Reds General Manager Walt Jocketty usually sit when they visit.

"I had quite a few conversations with him last year," Howard said. "He's really down to earth. He asked me what the Reds should do. I said, 'Pitch the left-hander.'"

Which left-hander?

"However many he's got."

Dragons continued on C3

## Streak is 'tribute to product'

### Dragons

continued from C1

### 'Well-mannered' crowds

A Fifth Third Field crowd differs from a big-league crowd, the ushers say, not only in size, but in attitude. Disappointment in the team is rarely voiced.

"Not even last year when they lost all those games in a row (24 straight at home from late June to mid-August)," Kraus said. "Well, maybe a little grumbling. But no complaints."

Kraus remembers the infamous brawl with the Peoria Chiefs three years ago this month but swears he has yet to see a fight in the stands.

"It's been a very well-mannered crowd," he said.

The Dragons do not



Larry Williamson

These Dayton Dragons employees have been with the team since its inaugural season. STAFF PHOTO BY RON ALVEY

think this is an accident.

"We made a number of arrests the first couple of months," said Steve Crews, head of stadium security since the beginning. "That kind of set the tone."

Some fans in those early years had trouble rationalizing the building's no-smoking policy. They were, after all, outside.

"But word got around, and we've had no problems since," Winkelmann said. "You've got to give the security department credit. If there's a problem, we give them a call and they're right there. They don't mess around, which is the way it ought to be."

From the start, the Dragons have marketed their product as affordable family entertainment. They see friendly ushers — who also appear to be having a good time — as integral to that experience.

And make no mistake, they do have a good time. Said John Conger, a former Brookville High School football coach who supervises ticket-takers, "If it wasn't fun, I wouldn't do it."

### Proving skeptics wrong

Back in the lobby, Kraus is still talking. The Bowling Green Hot Rods' bus driver

is always good for a story or two, he figures.

"Bus drivers will give you a rundown on everything that's happening around the league and what's happened with their ballclub," Kraus said. "They're very interesting to talk to.

"And the umpires actual-

ly are very interesting, too.

They tell you about where they're going, where they've been. They compare our crowd to crowds at other stadiums, and they speak very highly of Dayton, Ohio."

A thrill for Kraus was speaking with the late Joe Nuxhall, whom he remem-

bers as "a real class act" and "never in a hurry" when it came to signing every last autograph." Nuxhall, he said, came to several Dragons games on his own, apart from any obligation with the Reds.

The 12-year employees also remember the first Dragons game like it was yesterday.

"It was a construction site and a field at the same time," said Miller, recalling that Fifth Third Field wasn't quite finished when the first professional pitch since 1951 sailed here on April 27, 2000.

Miller and the rest had heard skeptics say baseball would never work in Dayton. There were many reasons given. They all seem silly now.

"That's been the exciting thing about it," Brannon said. "To see it grow."

"Believe it or not, you've still got people coming here for the first time," noted Howard. "That's a tribute to the product."

Contact this reporter at (937) 225-2408 or smccllland@DaytonDailyNews.com