

Knit, stitch, thread for the home team

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Marin Independent Journal

Article Launched:07/19/2007 08:53:01 PM PDT

SOME baseball fans at Tuesday's game between the San Francisco Giants and the visiting Atlanta Braves will be keeping their eyes on the ball in a different way from most fans.

The ball they'll be paying more attention to will be a ball of yarn.

More than 1,500 needle art enthusiasts, including many from Marin, will show up at AT&T Park in San Francisco to knit, crochet, cross-stitch and cheer in the stands as part of Stitch N' Pitch Night.

There will be designated cross-stitchers and ballpark groupies, but then you've got those needle artists who also love baseball. Men, women and children will don their Giants paraphernalia and collect their freebie Stitch N' Pitch tote bags filled with needle art goodies at the door. The stitching fans will be the ones in their own seating section, able to lift their eyes from the needles in time to catch the base hits and diving catches.

The trademarked Stitch N' Pitch movement began as the haphazard brainchild of the Seattle Mariners front office, which, rumor has it, employs more than just one lunchtime knitter. Expecting to sell about 200 tickets for the first Stitch N' Pitch event in 2005, more than 1,200 pitcher-watching-stitchers filled the stands that day in Seattle. That number grew to 2,400 last year and 3,600 in 2007.

Stitch N' Pitch events are being hosted by 25 of the 30 major league teams this year. More than 1,000 needle artists brought their crocheting to the first Stitch N' Pitch event at AT&T Park last year.

Stitch N' Pitch spokeswoman Barbara Paley expects to get even more participation next year. She is a master knitter after half a century of knitting, and an active member of the National NeedleArts Association. With an MBA in marketing, Paley hooked up with TNNA publicist Libby Butler-Gluck to spread Stitch N' Pitch from coast to coast.

"I called up the Giants, asked if they knew much about knitting and they said, 'No,' and I imposed myself onto them," says Paley.

And it was smooth stitching from then on. Anchored by local committees and governed by an advisory committee, the TNNA has high hopes for bringing these two American traditions even closer in the future, and so far the major league teams want to play ball.

"It's just too much fun to go to the baseball game and knit while you're watching the game, says Kirstin Muench of Muench Yarns in Petaluma. "How American is that?"

Paley is one of the many crossover fans - an avid knitter and Giants season ticket holder. Not everyone has to fit the mold as neatly and for some, knitting serves as an easy way to make baseball games bearable.

"It's a win-win situation," says baseball lover Sandra Leister, who participated in the Giants first Stitch N' Pitch event as a member of San Francisco-based knitting guild the Knitting Bridge.

"I'm not at the game with just baseball fans," Leister adds. "I can watch the game and learn new knitting techniques."

Paley emphasizes that the event is for everyone from experienced needle artists to curious first-timers. You can check out the knitting contest and the teaching tables, and if you get hungry from all that knitting you can grab a super dog with chips, dubbed the "Stitch Bag" or a "Knitting Bowl of Ravioli" at the food stands. For those older than 21, you can wash it down with some hot cocoa laced with liqueur, a combo known as the "Stitch N' Pitch Snuggler."

So Tuesday night, it'll be knit, stitch, thread for the home team, and if they don't win - at least you get a cute egg-cozy out of it.

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