

Passion & Pride fuel the Bandits

Story by Don Cameron

Pueblo's Santos family keeps fastpitch engine chuggin'

How far have the Pueblo Bandits come since their first season on the fastpitch sandlots of southern Colorado? Ask the fashion police.

"Our first year we played, we didn't have uniforms," team veteran Chris Santos said. "We played in white hospital scrubs. We had white scrubs with a red number on it and red hats, and everybody bought white pants."

"What I love about the Bandits is Chris always wants to put together a squad that competes at the highest level, and that's where my interest lies," said infielder Mike Kelley. "We're sort of softball amateurs, doing it without a big budget, and occasionally we knock off one of the big boys, the old-school way."

The Santos family has been the crucial ingredient. Patriarch Joe Santos played, coach, umpired and administered adult and youth fastpitch leagues. A Colorado ASA Hall of Famer, Joe Santos instilled an overwhelming love of the game in sons Chris, Mike and Jerry. "My dad wanted to go to a world tournament. As a player, he never made it, but as a coach, as a dad, he taught us what it takes to get to the next level," Chris Santos said. "In 1994 when we went to Prince Edward Island for our first worlds, it was like a dream come true."

Jerry started the Bandits in 1987 and at age 41 remains the team's starting catcher. Running three miles a day and staying fit as a high school and college basketball ref hasn't hurt. He has caught in all 13 of the ISC world tournaments the Bandits have played in. In 1995, he was named to the North American Fastpitch Association AAA All-World Team.

Chris plays sparingly now, but hasn't lost his fundamentals. As the

manager and primary sponsor, he has toiled relentlessly off the field so the Bandits can thrive on the field. A 2003 Colorado ASA Hall of Fame inductee, Chris also is the Western Region vice president of the ISC.

Mike Santos has played fastpitch since age 10 and chips in with coaching the team. "It's a family thing," Mike said. "My dad loved the game, he respected it. My brothers are doing the same thing. And my mom [Frances] stood in there with all the traveling. That hard work and love for the game have helped us prove that Colorado can be up there in men's softball."

Jerry's son Nick, the youngest player on the Bandits, will compete this summer with the U.S. 19-and-under national team at the International Softball Federation world tournament.

"Nick, he's going to be a pretty good ballplayer," Mike Santos said. "He's so fundamentally sound, has a good arm, a good eye for the ball."

"In [the Bandits'] case, it's purely a case of family traditions and total passion and love of the game and virtually doing anything humanly possible to keep that



Bandits batter Mike Kelley at 2006 ISC worlds (3-2 win against Jarvis Merchants)/photo by Mary Kelley

team going," said ISC Executive Director Ken Hackmeister. "Chris is pretty special. There's not many like him around the country or the world who put in the time and effort and money that he does."

From the Manleys to the Sisko Kid

Despite a budget immensely smaller than powerhouse clubs, the Bandits have assembled an impressive club résumé: top 10 at 2005 ISC worlds; perennial ISC Western Region champs; fifth at 2003 ASA major nationals; defeated a touring U.S. national team at 1999 Pioneer Days in Salt Lake City; fourth at 1997 NAFAAAA World Series; a win in Pueblo last season against the SoCal Bombers, the runner-up at the 2007 ISC worlds.

"Probably our biggest win was beating Broken Bow [Nebraska] in their backyard," Chris Santos noted. "Doc Simmons paid \$5,000 to the winner. He expected to take it home, not to have to pay it out."

All-world players have contributed to that success. NAFA selected a batch of Bandits — past and present — to the

Photos by Mary Kelley and the Pueblo Bandits



Grand Island 2005 004 - The Bandits after winning in Grand Island, Nebraska, in 2005

NAFA all-decade team: pitcher Kyle Kouka, infielder Mark Moziejko, outfielders Brad Spau and Shawn Vanduvall.

The Bandits have resisted the elite-team practice of importing players — except with pitching. Colorado ace Alan Colglazier helped the Bandits qualify for their first ASA A nationals and ISC worlds, but when he departed, the team picked up Auckland, New Zealand, hurler Kouka.

In recent years, Kiwi brothers Jeremy Manley and Regan Manley have donned the Bandits jersey. Jeremy keyed the Bandits' 2005 ISC worlds top-10 run. At the 2006 worlds, Manley recorded 34 strikeouts in a 3-2, 16-inning win against the Jarvis Merchants.

"Jeremy Manley is one of the smoothest pitchers," Mike Santos said. "He's young and he's got more days ahead of him. He's got all the tools. He's like a fine-tuned machine. I call him a Mercedes. The way he operates, it's a natural motion, not having to jump. He's just amazing."

Regan throws even harder, but Jeremy's total package — "Greg Maddux"-like control, Jerry Santos said — equates to a top-five world ranking. With the brother tandem deciding to play together for the Midwest Stampede (Iowa) in 2008, the Bandits have looked south for their next ace. Argentine lefty Sisko Sabate assumes the primary mound duties this season.

"Sisko is a good pitcher," Hackmeister said. "Is he a Jeremy Manley? No. He's physically small — he's probably six-foot — and thin, and he doesn't have a lot of body weight, but he has good ball movement. He'll be a good addition to the team and a good addition to the community."

The supporting cast will be primarily Pueblo talent and Bandits vets who now reside in metro Denver.

Kelley, 39, was the team's mainstay at shortstop for two decades, and now sees action mostly at the infield corners. Never question his commitment to the game. Kelley had heart surgery in 2004 to replace a valve, but he drove some teammates to worlds in North Dakota a month later and was back on the diamond to help steer the Bandits to

another worlds the following summer.

"I remember my first game with the Bandits, a league game, and the challenge of hitting rise balls, it just kind of blew me away," Kelley said. "It's so much different than baseball. Everything happens so quick. Not just the pitching, the infield play, everything."

Speedy Jason Shea mans center field. A trio of Arizona ballplayers, including standout second baseman Cliff Wisdom, add experience and proven ability. Mario Arellano, who played with Pueblo team Dilligaf last season, debuts with the Bandits this season at shortstop. Alan West will see time at first base and third. Randy Arellano adds depth and versatility.

Elevating the game

Last season, the Bandits won the Colorado ASA state tournament, defeating an up-and-coming Health Tech team in the championship game. It was the first state tourney that ASA had allowed the Bandits to enter since 1994.

Chris Santos said the ASA already has banned the Bandits from playing in the 2008 states, as opposing teams have argued that the Bandits — especially with Kiwi imports — are unbeatable within the state. Santos said it's important for the Bandits to get as many games within Colorado as possible, but added that Colorado teams will only get better by playing the Bandits.

"Playing us is going to help them if they want to go to C nationals or wherever they want to go," Chris Santos said.

to play the best teams," Kelley said. "We took our lumps, we had some pretty rude awakenings. But when you are seeing the top pitching and playing the tough competition, you do get better."

Teams from Colorado and beyond will get the chance to face the '08 Bandits and savor a fantastic fastpitch atmosphere during the 2008 Joe Santos Memorial Tournament, set for May 23-25 (e-mail Chris Santos at jcsantos25@msn.com for info).

"We invite any Western-based team to come out that weekend," Jerry Santos said. "We give scholarship money to young high schoolers, so it's for a great cause, but mostly come for the ball and the atmosphere. My dad had a big family, so we're out there cooking, we have beer tents, we take care of the fields. I like to think we have good umpiring. There are announcers. It's a weekend where you'll be on center stage, one team at a time, in fastpitch heaven ... at least in Pueblo."

The Memorial Day event drew the SoCal Bombers last season. This year, the Vancouver Grey Sox are expected to play, as are the Manleys' Stampede team and other top-tier clubs. Pueblo, Denver, Boulder and Fort Collins teams will add to the mix. Games are played on the Pueblo diamond dedicated to the man who spearheaded fastpitch fever in the city. Joe Santos died of Lou Gehrig's disease in 2003, but his name remains central to the Pueblo softball scene.

"There have been a lot of big games, but one of the biggest moments was when they dedicated the field to my dad in 2004," Chris Santos said. "When they renamed the ballpark there, that was Joe Santos Day in Pueblo. For our family, that was huge. My dad deserved that. He would have never asked for it or expected it, but as much as he loved the game and spent time around the game, he deserved it."



1994 Pueblo Bandits.jpg - The Bandits at the 1994 ISC worlds at Summerside, Prince Edward Island, Canada



Opening ceremonies at 2007 Joe Santos Memorial Tournament. From left to right Mike Santos, Frances Santos, Chris Santos and Jerry Santos.