

Chronicler of minor league baseball life comes back to Orinda

By Janice De Jesus Correspondent San Jose Mercury News

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EL CERRITO -- Katya Cengel strides into the Junket cafe wearing a Louisville Slugger shirt. One may guess she probably knows a thing or two about Kentucky baseball.

That's because she really does know about baseball in the Bluegrass State. Cengel, a 1994 Campolindo High School grad, spent one out of her eight years as a reporter for the Louisville Courier-Journal following three minor league teams and one independent baseball team, capturing the often emotional yet "unglamorous reality of Minor League Ball."

It's all included in her book "Bluegrass Baseball: A Year in the Minor League Life," in which Cengel chronicled the teams during the 2010 season -- from the front office staff to the players -- those barely out of their teens to those pushing 40 with Major League dreams still coursing through their veins.

She's no stranger to covering stories of triumph and struggles and the human condition. Cengel covered newly-independent Latvia in the late 1990s and reported on the uprisings leading to the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine.

"In journalism, I was known for the tear-jerker stories," said Cengel, 36.

Sports and journalism were already in her blood from an early age. Born in Oakland and raised in Berkeley, Cengel -- whose sports resume includes heptathlon and basketball -- attended Berkeley High School for three years before capping off her final year at Campolindo High, a school well known for its high-caliber sports programs.

Family friend Jinny Rudd first knew Cengel as a toddler when she was friends with Cengel's parents in the Cal Berkeley Student Village in Albany.

"She was a fun child who kept her parents on their toes," Rudd said. "She was especially inquisitive even then -- an early precursor to her travel and journalistic career."

Rudd headed to the East Coast but remained in contact with Cengel's family. When Cengel reached high school, Rudd relocated back to the West Coast and lived in Orinda.

"Katya had become an enthusiastic and dedicated basketball player in high school and was playing on the Campolindo High School team. She would come to our house after school and before practice to hang out due to our family friendship and the proximity of our home to school to do homework and eat some energy food ready for practice. Her interest in athletics was clear and much enjoyed by our children who were all involving themselves in serious athletic pursuits in school, too."

Rudd said she's not at all surprised that Cengel wrote a book about sports.

"She clearly had a great interest in the athletic world and the politics and lifestyle involved," Rudd said. "It is impressive and exciting that she is moving to enlarge her writing endeavors from the world of journalism to include that of published author."

Being raised surrounded by the vast coverage of Bay Area sports teams gave Cengel an advantage to covering baseball in Kentucky, a state widely regarded as a college basketball stronghold. But, Cengel said, she discovered that there were major stories behind the minor league banners.

She started a series on the Kentucky minor league teams -- the Lexington Legends, the Louisville Bats, the Bowling Green Hot Rods and the independent Florence Freedom -- not the sports section, but for the Courier-Journal's features section of the Louisville Courier-Journal in 2009 and the series ran over four days.

"I realized there was more to this--the untold stories, the built-in drama of 'Am I going to make it to the majors?'" said Cengel, who moved back to the Bay Area last year and now lives in Richmond. "I wanted to get that rare glimpse of minor league life and focus on the different aspects of that life -- the foreign-born player, the young player, the older player, the player about to embark on raising a family."

She also delved into the lives of team owners, managers, fans and staff and players' family members. Cengel worked her regular shift as a feature writer then would head to the ballpark. She accompanied the teams on the road on weekends for their away games.

"Sometimes they'll have home games at the same time and I'll think, 'Great, which one am I going to cover?' " said Cengel.

The 1998 UC San Diego grad who majored in literature and writing thought earlier in her career that she'd eventually write a book,

"But I didn't think that it would be about baseball," said Cengel, who's currently working on a memoir about her time covering stories in the Ukraine.

Writing a book, she found, was different than writing a feature story.

"My book editor said, 'Remember you can write longer,'" she said. "I was used to tightening stories, getting them as concise as possible."

She said her feature-writing background came in handy when talking to the players' wives and girlfriends, getting the stories behind the stories.

"These are the people and stories there are often overlooked because they're never in the limelight," Cengel said. "They would talk about the more emotional things that the men would never talk about."

Lafayette Vice Mayor Mike Anderson and his wife Courtney Murphree met Cengel when she was 8 years old, when Cengel's mother became friends with the couple. It's a friendship they've maintained through the years.

"You don't need to be a baseball fan to enjoy 'Bluegrass Baseball,' " Murphree said. "I got completely caught up in this easy-to-read account of the world of minor league baseball. Katya's book is an entertaining look at the hard work, struggles and sacrifices of everyone involved in the game -- from the players to the managers, groundskeepers, owners and front office -- their love of the game, the dreams it offers, and the entertainment it provides. 'Bluegrass Baseball' is as much a human interest story as it is about baseball. I doubt I can ever watch a baseball game without reflecting on what I've learned from this book."

Cengel said she hopes readers would get a better understanding of the sacrifices the players and their families make to succeed in their profession. Life in the minor leagues, she said, is a subculture, a different lifestyle and you can't help but be inspired by the stories about the people behind the sport.

Katya Cengel Book signing
and discussion

BOOK: "Bluegrass Baseball: A Year in the Minor League Life"

WHEN: Noon, Oct. 13

WHERE: Orinda Books, 276 Village Square, Orinda