Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Cedar Grove-Belgium High School varsity baseball coach Mike Ruppel is passionate about his favorite sport and about providing equipment that helps prevent injuries and improve performance.

Realizing there is little room in the district budget for the program other than basic uniforms and equipment, Ruppel, a physical therapist who was named head coach last year, approached local businesses to support the fledgling program.

In some cases, they approached him, Ruppel said.

When officials at Willman Industries learned from Ozaukee Press articles the team needed a batting cage, the Cedar Grove company donated $2,250 for it.

“Clay Willman is a huge sportsman,” Ruppel said. “He heard about the needs of the program. He liked the way the season ended last year and wanted to help out. It was something we definitely needed to get the program going.”

Since the School Board had set aside a little additional money for the program, that was spent on a bullpens

“I was told by a National Bank executive to write a grant letter and include a wish list,” Ruppel said. “They gave us $3,500 for covers for the pitching mound and home plate so it doesn’t get too wet when it rains and turf savers for the infield grass and dirt.”

The grant also paid for a radar gun that clocks the speed of pitches.

In addition, Ruppel raised $4,000 by selling banners for the outfield fence. The banners, which sell for $350, will hang for three years. He hopes to eventually fill the fence with colorful banners advertising the program’s supporters.

Some of that money was used for an indoor pitching mound that simulates outdoor field conditions.

“We’re getting a lot of big stuff and good stuff that a lot of schools our size don’t have,” Ruppel said.

The equipment will help reduce injuries and improve players' skills, he said.

"We've had a lot of positive things happen over the spring," he said. "We've had a lot of people who support the program and want to bring it up to where it needs to be. With the community coming together, it's been absolutely wonderful."

There is also an active boosters club, Belgium-Cedar Grove Home Run Club, which raises money through concessions and fundraising efforts.

The team donated the banners for Willman Industries and National Exchange Bank to thank them for their donations.

The banners were a successful fundraiser for his college baseball team, Ruppel said, so he decided to try it at the high school.

The School Board gave its blessings and changed its policy that had prohibited advertising on school property.

"We had a really good attendance at our games last year, and we hope to have even more people come out this season," Ruppel said. "Dads brought their 3-year-olds, and people use the batting cage. It's not just for the team, it's also for the community. That's how we wanted it to be.

"The equipment is a huge step forward from where we were last year."

The cadet baseball program run through Rocket Recreation is made up of seventh and eighth-grade students from Cedar Grove and Belgium, which will enhance the high school baseball program similar to how Broncos youth football helps the varsity football team, the coach said.

"We're not there yet, but hopefully we will be there soon," Ruppel said.

Last year, the team tied for the Central Lakeshore Conference title and eight of the nine starters received conference team honors. The Rockets lost its first game in state tournament play. The coach has high expectations for his team this year.

"The team is ranked 15th in the state for summer baseball," Ruppel said. "We're the smallest team that's ranked."

Image Information: ADVERTISING ON THE outfield fence has brought in more than $4,000 for the Cedar Grove-Belgium High School baseball program. Varsity coach Mike Ruppel hopes to fill the fence with banners. Photo by Sam Arendt