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FANS FOR LIFE

400 Club celebrates 50 Brave years in Atlanta

Organization of team's fans to hold annual banquet on Saturday.

By Mark Davis
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The best Braves game, ever? That must have been game 7, the '92 National League Championship Series. Remember? Cabrera banged a two-run single to take the series from the Pirates. Oh, it was the bottom of the ninth, too.

Or maybe it was the '95 World Series, game 6. Glavine threw a one-hitter in that final game. We won.

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But perhaps it was — Go ahead, fill in the blank. This is a conversation that, like the game itself, could go into extra innings. And when the folks discussing the games are members of the Braves 400 Fan Club, they may talk all night.

They'll have that chance Saturday, when the fan club

celebrates 50 years of cheering the Braves. The group, founded in 1965, will hold its annual banquet, the Eddie Glennon Gameboree, at the Marriott Perimeter Center. The gathering, named after a former Braves executive, will be the club's 49th gathering.

Among the guests: former Braves Phil Niekro, Pat Jarvis, Alejandro Pena and Jim Nash. Braves President John Schuerholz is the guest speaker. Fredi Gonzalez, the Braves' manager, also will attend.

The lineup excites 400 Club President Rick Wheeler. A Decatur resident, he and

Braves fans continued on D5



Club programs chronicle all the seasons — the good, the not-so-good and the great. MARK DAVIS / MRDAVIS@AJC.COM

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Attending the 49th Gameboree in 2014 are (from left) 400 Club President Rick Wheeler, former President Wayne Coleman and First Vice President Dave Badertscher. MARK DAVIS /



When the Atlanta Braves came to town in 1966, the team already had a booster club in place: the Braves 400 Club. That fan organization is celebrating its 50th anniversary this Saturday. CONTRIBUTED

The club's name ... was a combination of hope and history. Founders hoped they'd get 400 members; and, historically, .400 was a batting average few players ever achieve — even temporarily.

Braves fans

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fellow members Wayne Coleman and David Badertscher got together this week to recall some of the Braves' finest moments – and, well, OK – some games it would be good to forget.

"I can't always remember to pay my taxes on April 15, but I can always remember the dates of games," Coleman said.

They're baseball guys. Wheeler, 67, grew up in Los Angeles, where he "worshiped" the Hollywood Stars, a Pacific Coast League minor league team. When the Dodgers moved west, in 1957, the Stars relocated. Wheeler, angry with the East Coast upstarts who gave his team the bum's rush, cast about for another team to support. A team in Milwaukee, the Braves, caught his fancy.

When he retired from his job as a management engineer, he and his wife moved to Atlanta. It was a logical choice: The weather was good, and the airport connected them with the world.

The real reason? "Well, the Braves," said Wheeler, a 400 Club member since 2002. "When you cut through it, that's why I'm here."

Coleman, 66, a retired

corporate trainer and former club president, started playing when he was 5. He moved here from Springfield, Mass., in 1979, and joined the fan club two years later. Since then, he has seen about 2,500 Braves games. If you ever watch a televised game, look for Coleman; he's the permanent fixture behind the dugout, along the third-base line.

Badertscher, the club's first vice president, moved back to his hometown from Virginia after a career in collegiate libraries. As a kid, he played Little League. As an adult, he played softball, hanging up his glove at 45. Badertscher picked it back up a couple of years ago when he attended the Atlanta Braves Fantasy Camp.

"I found out a 62-year-old man can hold his own as long as he has access to the training room afterward," said Badertscher, who's now 65. He joined the club in 2010.

The club, the trio notes, is committed to recognizing talent – and not just at the major league level. For years, it's honored players at the high school and collegiate level, as well as team managers and college programs.

At this year's banquet, club members will recognize fielder Michael

Chavis, a graduate of Sprayberry High School in Cobb, as its high school player of the year. College player of the year honors go to catcher Max Pentecost, who attended Kennesaw State.

Good deeds

Do the math, and you realize that the 400 club was here before the Braves. When the all-new Atlanta Braves took to the field for the first time, in 1966, its booster club was already a year old.

The club's name, said Wheeler, was a combination of hope and history. Founders hoped they'd get 400 members; and, historically, 400 was a batting average few players ever achieve – even temporarily.

The club hit its goal: business and civic leaders clamored to join the club – in fact, it still has a few members who joined in those heady days before the Braves hit town. Its membership lagged a bit in the mid-1980s – lean years, those – but skyrocketed to 1,000 members in 1995, when the Braves won the World Series.

Today, its rolls are less than half that World Series high. Too many people, said Coleman, think membership is invitation-only, and that members have to be season-tick-

et holders. "That's always been a rumor," he said. "And that rumor's stuck."

Fact: A one-year individual membership is \$25, and you can add others in the family for \$15 each.

The club has a long record of good deeds, said Niekro, who routinely attends the annual banquets. A Hall of Famer, "Knucksie" Niekro pitched for the Braves for 21 years, and now lives in Flowery Branch.

"You know, they (the club) have been a mainstay," said Niekro. "I don't know if there is a

better booster club out there."

Niekro, the three club members agreed, is a great ambassador for the game, too.

And what a game it is. Baseball, even in these short, long-shadowed days, is a shiny reminder of a brighter future.

"The game itself and how it's played has not changed in the last century," Wheeler said. "I don't think you can make that statement about professional basketball, and definitely not pro football."

For a numbers person,

said Badertscher, baseball remains a source of endless fascination. "There's a labyrinth of statistics you can get into."

"It's like (former pitcher) Jim Bouton said," Coleman said. "You spend your whole life gripping a baseball, and then you find out that it's the other way around."

The Braves 400 Fan Club Eddle Glennon Gameboree, Saturday, 5-8:30 p.m., the Atlanta Marriott Perimeter Center. For more information: <http://www.braves400.org/event/2015-gameboree/>.

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