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Tampa Bay Rays honor Chiefland Lady Indians Three-Time State Softball Champions



Lena Weatherford (left) and Head Softball Coach Wayne Weatherford prepare to watch the game. Coach Weatherford was with the team on the field as they were honored.

Story and Video By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 27, 2016 @ 8:27 p.m.

Photos By Sharon Hardison, Sherry Hallman and Melanie King Hutchison and Jeff M. Hardison

ST. PETERSBURG – The Chiefland Lady Indians who are 2014, 2015 and 2016 Florida High School Athletic Association Division 1A State Softball Champions were honored Sunday (Sept. 25) by a short presentation hosted by the Tampa Bay Rays at Tropicana Field.

The most recently past set of Lady Indians Softball Team coaches and team members are: Head Coach Wayne Weatherford and Lena Weatherford as scorekeeper; and Assistant Coach Brian Gore, Assistant Coach Jimmy Anderson and Assistant Coach Harland Stalvey; and players Sydney Parks (#11) at second base; Emily Hallman (#14) as catcher; Takiya London (#4) as shortstop; Lauren Parker (#3) at center field; Morgan Anderson (#2) at first base; Samantha Rolfe (#9) at left field; Erika Gilliam (#33) at third base; Hannah Gore (#5) at right field; Lauren Stalvey (#7) as starting pitcher; Kensley Durrance (#20) as relief pitcher; and available substitutes Tataneisha Barnes (#12); Aleaha Rhoomes (#1); Taylor Simpson (#19); Maci Thomas (#15); Simone White (#22); and Karlie Meeks (#10).

HOW IT HAPPENED

For this to happen, first it took the Chiefland Lady Indians Softball Team's winning three consecutive annual FHSAA 1A State Championship titles.

And then there was a nudge from a Lady Indians fan who saw a potential for a good event.

Earlier this year, Sharon Hardison, being an avid fan of the Tampa Bay Devil Rays (now named the Tampa Bay Rays) previously had seen the baseball club endorse efforts by young ball

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players in the Tampa Bay Region. She reached out to the marketing department and asked if the club would do anything for the Chiefland girls.

Within a few weeks, Jeane Drury, a ticket sales account executive with the Tampa Bay Rays (which has its home stadium in Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg) contacted Mrs. Hardison. Mrs. Hardison contacted Amy Anderson and Melanie King Hutchison with the ticket sales person's name and information, and those ladies started the ball rolling to make all systems go for launch on Sunday.



This a view of the teams being honored in left field. It was captured by a cell phone from the stands.



The Lady Indians walk on the field.

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The girls' tickets were free because it was Champions Day at The Trop. Parents and others bought discounted tickets. Some people on Sunday may have been a little surprised by a \$20 parking fee imposed by the Rays on its land around the stadium.

On Sunday (Sept. 25), there were 12 teams recognized by the Rays' organization by them entering at left field and exiting some yards away. As the teams marched, they were introduced and video that was taken by Rays' staff was projected on the big screen.

Photography on the field was restricted to Rays' staff only.

Following is an alphabetical list of the teams: Atlantic Beach Suns Baseball; Bartow High School Softball; Bishop Verot Softball; Chiefland High School Softball; Ft. Caroline Thunder Baseball; Ft. Myers/Cape Coral Softball; Gainesville High School Softball; Julington Creek Storm 6U Baseball; Lakeland Christian High School Softball; Oviedo 8U Softball; West Pasco Debs All-stars Softball; and Winter Park 12U Baseball.

The Chiefland High School girls were among the few with banners to carry in front of their group, and they had the loudest cheering section in the stands.

Several other groups were recognized that day, including the Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks; service members from MacDill Air Force Base; and all past and present veterans.

The Rays' marketers also noted some of the other civic programs where the team is credited for their participation.

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Some of the Chiefland team and family members.



LOSS RECOGNIZED

Before the game on Sunday afternoon, though, there was a moment of silence in memory of Miami Marlins pitcher José Fernández, who had died in the wee hours of that very morning as the result of injuries he suffered in a boating accident.

Fernandez had defected from Cuba at the age of 15.

The Rays announcer gave a moving speech about Fernández's progress through a Tampa Bay Area high school before being drafted to the Miami team.

Nine years after his successful escape from Cuba, after becoming a member of the Marlins, Fernandez died at the age of 24. There were other fatalities in that boating accident, the United States Coast Guard reported.

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Rays mascot Raymond walks on the home team's side of the field.



Fans pose with Raymond.

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Raymond poses with Emily Hallman (right) and Lauren Jones, her cousin.

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José De La Cruz (right) and Karson Hutchison pose with a relatively new mascot Inflation Raymond.

THE GAME

The Rays, who are not going beyond the regular season this year, lost to the Boston Red Sox by a score of 3-2 in the 10th inning.

It was the last time Boston Red Sox designated hitter David “Papi” (pronounced poppy) Ortiz (#34) would play on Tropicana Field, because he is retiring. The Boston fans went wild each time he was at bat.

On Sept. 27, both Ortiz and right-fielder Mookie Betts (#50) had batting averages of .321 and they were ranked as the top two batters in Boston at that time.

Boston pitcher Eduardo Rodriguez (#52) started the game and he struck out several batters. Heath Hembree (#37) was the second Boston pitcher and he struck out a number of Rays as well. Red Sox pitchers struck out 23 batters in Sunday's 10-inning win over the Tampa Bay Rays.

Rays pitcher Jake Odorizzi (#23) was the starting pitcher for the home team. There were at least four other pitchers for that team during that game as well.

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David Ortiz warms up before the game.



David Ortiz and Mookie Betts speak with each other before the game starts.

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Mookie Betts



Kevin Kiermaier warms up before the game starts.

NEIGHBORING FANS

All of the CHS Softball Team was seated in the midst of Boston Red Sox fans.

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Those visiting fans were relatively well-behaved, as were the visitors from Levy County. One of the Boston fans was a veteran of the Korean War. He used to have season tickets to Boston games up there, but they became too expensive.

PLAYER INJURED

For many Rays fans, a sad part of the game was when Rays centerfielder Kevin Kiermaier (#39) left the game due to a bruise on the palm of his left hand, after being hit while he was at bat.

Although he got a walk out of it, he ended up having to leave the game early.

The Rays' Platinum Gold Glove-winning centerfielder was removed from the game after the Rays batted in the bottom of the fourth.

Mikie Mahtook (#27) moved from right field to center field and Jaff (pronounced Jeff) Decker (#14) entered the game to play right field.

Kiermaier missed part of the season earlier due to an injury too.



David Ortiz at bat.



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Mookie Betts at bat.



DJ Kitty, a Rays mascot, Raymond and Pikachu take the field before a race of characters. Pikachu is among the Pokemon creatures.



DJ Kitty (left) and Pikachu are on the field.