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Lafayette native launches professional baseball team

The Oakland Ballers- a Bay Area team to rally around

By Jon Kingdon



Photo provided

Bryan Carmel with the legendary Hal The Hot Dog Guy

There's a quote by American author Wendelin Van Draanen that says, "You never forget your first love." For Lafayette native Bryan Carmel and his classmate at College Prep High School, Chicago native and long-time Oakland resident, Paul Freedman, that love was baseball. "Our friendship was formed being A's fans and baseball was a bonding experience for us," Freedman said.

Like most kids, Carmel was a collector of baseball cards and memorabilia, and he had a more direct connection with the Oakland A's. "My mom ran preschools in Alamo and Danville where a number of the A's players sent their kids," Carmel said. "I would work there over the summer as a teacher's helper, and I would get autographs from the players when they would come in with their kids."

Carmel would graduate from Columbia University with a major in religion and writing, and stayed in New York for fifteen years, starting a career in television, comedy, and documentaries and met his wife Anamay who was in law school. "I was working in TV in New York and had an opportunity to move to LA for a job as a development exec and have been working in LA ever since as a writer, producer, and creative executive," Carmel said. "I've been raising my kids in LA, but my heart has always been in the Bay Area where I grew up."

Despite having lived in baseball hotbeds, Carmel stayed true to his Bay Area sports roots and was taken aback when he learned of the A's potential departure from Oakland: "In June 2023, I was working on a movie project and the entire industry shut down with the strikes, and it was then that I got the news that the Oakland A's were really going to leave town. I was very frustrated at how the media has been portraying Oakland and San Francisco as big coastal cities that are completely broken and that's just not the Oakland that I know and love."

Freedman has been a very successful entrepreneur in education technology and has started a number of very successful companies

and had just exited from his last company. "Paul and I had always wanted to do something together and in June, out of the blue, he called me and said we should start a baseball team and I said 'Yes, absolutely' and we became completely obsessed with this project."

And from this simple phone call, the Oakland Ballers were on their way to becoming an established team. Carmel and Freedman came away very impressed at the efforts by the East Bay fans in their efforts to try and keep the team in Oakland. "We saw the energy around the 'sell movement,' and it was incredibly inspiring to see that type of fan activation," Carmel said.

Having seen the Raiders leave the city twice and the Warriors leave for San Francisco, the A's departure was a final blow for Carmel and Freedman. "We felt that a new pro baseball team that helps the East Bay would start a new chapter for baseball that would give the people of Oakland something to rally around," Carmel said. "Sports teams are the institutions that bring us together at a time when we're more divided than ever along political, social, and economic lines. It just felt untenable that a city as great as Oakland with a wonderful fan base would not have a baseball team."

Despite limited knowledge on how to create a baseball team, Freedman and Carmel brought the tools and skills developed from their respective careers. "At the start, people did not take us seriously though our wives were incredibly supportive through this adventure," Carmel said. "It was an interesting marriage between Paul and myself. We're both not afraid to look at a blank page and that's what it takes. We saw it as a business that's grounded in kind of a movement because we were trying to create a paradigm shift in the way that communities and sports teams work together and coexist."

Again, unlike most teams, the plan was for the Oakland Ballers to be more than just a bunch of players with the city's name on their jerseys. "We established the principles of what our

team would be about: bringing diverse communities together, and knowing that the real value of a team can't be measured in a balance sheet—it's the fan base. The fans are what creates the value of the team and we wanted a team where we were centering the fans in every aspect of the organization."

Freedman and Carmel did not want to be affiliated with any major league team, so the choice was to join one of the four independent minor league teams – The Atlantic League, The Frontier League, The American Association, or the Pioneer League. "We got an agent to represent us and received offers from the leagues, but the Pioneer league was our first choice because it's an innovative league," Carmel said. "For example, instead of extra innings, we'll have a home-run derby where each team has a batter that has two minutes to hit the most homeruns."

They now had to find a facility to play the games. Laney College has very fine facilities but did not have a sufficient amount of seating. At the press conference announcement about the creation of the Oakland Ballers, Freddie Morris from the city of Oakland raised the possibility of the team playing at Raimondi Park in West Oakland, "It was a real opportunity to show what can happen when private citizens, community members, and the city and neighbors actually work together and to prove everybody wrong that said that you can't get anything done in Oakland," Carmel said.

Raimondi Park was named in honor of Ernie Raimondi, a minor league baseball player who grew up in Oakland and was killed in World War II. "We had an Ernie Raimondi night, and we got his grandson to be our ceremonial first batter, along with 70 members of the Raimondi family being at the game," Carmel said. "The community has been very welcoming and it's been a very rewarding and positive experience with the team, the stadium, and the community."

It was important that the stadium stayed with the team's core principles from a design perspective. "We engaged with the community, and we learned what not to do from the other local baseball team," Carmel said. "We built relationships with the community groups and went door-to-door with Carroll Fife, who represents West Oakland, connecting us with our neighbors, making sure to address any concerns that they might have with the ballpark. Our whole vision is to have each game feel like a block party around a baseball game, people just having fun running into neighbors and friends. A big part of our mission is to support local sports and youth sports. When the Ballers aren't using the facility, the plan is for the field to be available for the community to sign up to use."

There were others that shared the same vision and helped to provide \$1.6 million to upgrade the park's facilities. "We have 53 investors and even members of the Haas family who were great stewards of baseball in Oakland," Carmel said. "Walter Haas's legacy is all about the community and they're all baseball people that want baseball to continue in Oakland."

As for putting the team together, luck smiled down upon them. "We were able to connect with Don Wakamatsu who's an icon in baseball as a player, coach, and manager, along with being a great guy that grew up in Hayward," Carmel said. "Don found the idea of giving baseball a new life in Oakland really appealing to him and he jumped on this journey with us as our head of baseball operations, bringing his rolodex from a 40-year career in baseball and told him that his job was to build the team and hire the coaches. Paul and I then hired Tyler Peterson as our Assistant General Manager and the rest of the staff. Tyler had previously worked with the Rocky Mountain Vibes of the Pioneer league as their head of player scouting and exposure and also worked with the PAC 12 network and he brought all his printouts and an encyclopedic knowledge of the best college players."

The Ballers play six games a week, only taking Mondays off. "It's a brutal schedule, but they're young guys and they're used to it," Carmel said. "They've got great attitudes, and they're just happy to have a shot. And you know, they do have a shot. We've lost four players to major league teams already. That's a compliment to our personnel department but it is annoying losing some of our best players."

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