

THE MONROE NEWS

Winterfest more like spring blast

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By

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Mike Stoll remembers playing in Ida's annual Snowball Softball Tournament when it was so cold he and his teammates preferred not to win.

"We were hoping we'd lose," Mr. Stoll said. "We couldn't wait to get off the field."

But the weather was shockingly different Saturday compared to past years.

At the annual THANKS festival, softball players were in shorts and T-shirts, not parkas and boots. On a gloriously warm February day with record-setting temperatures nudging close to 70 degrees, players were basking their skin under a warm sun instead of waddling around in snow pants and Stormy Kromers.

"This is beautiful," said Mr. Stoll, who played for the Roughriders. "I'm in shorts and not eight layers."

On the mound was Temperance resident Laurie Goss. Wearing a tank top while she lobbed pitches to batters, Mrs. Goss remembered the polar vortex year when the temperature was 22 below. That's more than a 90-degree difference between then and Saturday.

"I've never played in less than three layers," said the veteran of nine THANKS tournaments. "This is a difference of four layers. It's gorgeous."

The weekend winterfest was more like a blast of refreshing spring. Few Michiganders could recall a February day like that and at Ida Fireman's Park, hundreds took advantage. People were tailgating, playing basketball or lobbing bean bags toward corn holes.

"It's a blessing and it's a curse," said Tim Rousseau, one of the organizers. "I'd rather have it snow."

Without the white stuff and frigid temperatures, there was more to prepare for, like the softball field that normally is a frozen tundra. Plus, when it's cold, people congregate inside where they can spend their dollars on beer and food.

Still, Mr. Rousseau said, the organization is hoping to raise between \$40,000 and \$50,000 for the Wertemberger family. Dusty and Jen Wertemberger's one-year-old son, Kaiden, was born with several birth defects, such as heart issues, a small head and a hand defect.

The family, wearing purple T-shirts that stated they love someone with CdLS (Cornelia de Lange Syndrome, a very rare genetic disorder), gathered around Kaiden inside. It's unclear what the future holds, but the couple said they have endured difficult times, such as open heart surgery, with strong support from family and friends. And they remain hopeful that Kaiden, who faces many challenges, will continue to improve.

"He's gotten a lot stronger," Mrs. Wertemberger said. "We don't know what's going to happen down the road, but we have a lot of support."

While the Temperance couple's three-year-old daughter, Gracie, ran around playing, the family held and fed Kaiden, who has endured multiple hospital stays, surgeries and other issues.

"It's been really hard," Mrs. Wertemberger said.

They both work and have insurance, but the costs still can be overwhelming. Mrs. Wertemberger calls Kaiden her "multimillion-dollar man." So being the recipients of the festival's proceeds will absolutely help the family and a future that is certain to be challenging.

"This is just amazing," said Mr. Wertenberger, 32, who works at the Ida Farmers Co-op. "We're just very thankful all these people came out to help us."

That's the whole idea, organizers said. THANKS means Tailgaters Helping Aid Needy Kids Spirits. Now in its 17th year, the festival has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the families of local children who are fighting health issues.

"That's why we do it," said Mr. Rousseau, who lives in Louisville, Ken., but comes back home every year to help organize the event. "You get to know these people and you always want to succeed."

"It's like a fine-tuned machine now," added John Seger, another organizer. "We help a lot of kids."