

Columbia Blowfish scoring funds for city

By JEFF WILKINSON

jwilkinson@thestate.com

West Columbia's Jason Keeter had one eye on the field and one eye on the clouds Friday night, as rain threatened to spoil the home opener for the Columbia Blowfish.

The clouds parted just before start time, and the new team began play in a newly repaired Capital City Stadium.

"It's nice to see life in the old ballpark again," Keeter said as he sat in the front row with his wife and kids — before the rains came and the game was called at 9:30 p.m., in the fourth inning.

For city taxpayers, the team's presence is more than a game.

Since the departure of the Class A minor league Capital City Bombers more than a year ago, the city has been paying \$135,000 a year on the debt for the stadium's \$1.5 million 1991 renovation.

That debt will continue for six more years.

And City Council dropped an additional \$77,000 into renovations after vandals trashed the place last year in the absence of a tenant.

With the Coastal Plain collegiate summer league team now in place, the stadium is not only active but will pump some money back into the city's coffers.

The team is paying \$12,000 a year to lease the Assembly Street facility. It pays all utilities during the season. And it pays the city 5 percent of gross revenues on concessions.

"The more people that come in for a beer, hot dog or Pepsi, the better it is for the city," said Blowfish co-owner and president Bill Shanahan.

Friday's attendance figure was 3,867.

The team — made up of players from USC and other S.C. colleges — plays 28 home games a season.

Columbia Police Chief Dean Crisp came out to see one USC player — his son Adam. Sitting in the front row, Crisp kept an eye on the ball and an ear tuned to the radio — Adam's twin brother, USC freshman Andrew, was playing in the NCAA Baseball Tournament in Charlottesville, Va.

"I will be watching and listening," he said. "I'm the luckiest man in the world."

Shanahan anticipates booking 10 to 15 additional events this year, such as company picnics, festivals and concerts — a number he thinks could double in upcoming years.

For example, the S.C. General Assembly held its 13th annual picnic and softball game May 16, attracting about 600 people. Everyone who attended purchased food and drink, for which the city received a 5 percent cut.

Also, Columbia's annual Oyster Festival was scheduled for the facility last month, but was rained out.

Mayor Bob Coble is enthusiastic about having Shanahan back on board.

Shanahan, who is also president and general manager of the minor league Bay Bears in Mobile, Ala., is

regarded as the last general manager of a Columbia team to draw large crowds to the Capital City ballpark.

Shanahan ran the Bombers during the early 1990s and set team attendance records with promotions and exhibition games — such as a game between the U.S. and Cuban Olympic teams.

He chose a collegiate summer franchise because of the city's affection for college baseball.

Jim "Soni" Sonefeld threw out the first pitch Friday.

"Columbia wants summertime baseball and this will fill the gap," said Sonefeld, drummer for Hootie and the Blowfish, the band for whom the team is named.

The Coastal Plain League, which features college developmental players, fields 15 teams in the Carolinas and Virginia. There are teams in Florence and Spartanburg.

The league allows a team to choose up to four players from a university. Columbia's team includes players from most of South Carolina's colleges and universities.

Other attractions are the use of wooden bats and the sale of beer. College programs use aluminum bats; games are alcohol-free.

Coble predicted that with Shanahan's expertise in the market and the collegiate team's close ties to the Gamecocks and other local colleges, the team would flourish.

"It's a good fit," he said. "If we are going to keep the stadium, having a tenant is critical. I'm confident this will be successful."

The next game is Sunday at 6:05 p.m. at Capital City Stadium. Children are invited to play catch on the field beginning at 5 p.m. Tickets from Friday's game will be redeemable for a future game.

Reach Wilkinson at (803) 771-8495.