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Oh, Say Can You Sing?

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By John McCann

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DURHAM -- Taking their voices out to the ballpark, the Second Shift singers huddled Saturday morning near the third-base dugout at Durham Bulls Athletic Park and belted out the national anthem.

A stream of folks with the same goal as Second Shift lined up outside the ballpark waiting their turns to impress the judges for a shot at singing the "The Star-Spangled Banner" this season at a Durham Bulls game. The audition was scheduled to run from 10 a.m. to noon. At least 82 people showed up within the first hour for a turn to command the microphone.

Dave Minnich said Second Shift's soprano woke up with no voice. So while he's normally a bass man, Minnich ended up singing the melody when it was the group's turn to perform.

Most of the acts were soloists like Mary Wingate, who sings at First Calvary Baptist Church. She's done the anthem at Bulls games before.

"The biggest rush is the scream of the crowd after you sing it," Wingate said.

Joey Panzarella came from Raleigh to audition. He's from Cleveland, home of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Clutching a guitar, he put his folk-rock style to the "The Star-Spangled Banner."

"I think I sang it OK," Panzarella said.

Somewhere around 100 people were expected to audition, Bulls spokesman Matt DeMargel said. That number will get cut to about 50, he said. And some 35 of those actually will sing before a Bulls game, DeMargel said.

Elvis Cannon wasn't at the ballpark to audition. He was working with a crew of guys getting the stadium seats ready for the season.

And it's a pretty safe bet Cannon heard every single one of those folks who auditioned to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Why, it must take a real patriot to absorb the national anthem so many times.

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"We ain't got no other choice," said Cannon, who fortunately said he liked what he was hearing.

DeMargel figures between the auditions and actual baseball games through which he he's sat through at work over the last 13 years, he's heard "The Star-Spangled Banner" 2,500 times.

"I've heard a lot of national anthems," he said.

Clay Aiken's voice was behind one of them. That was back in 2003. Aiken was among the finalists on "American Idol" and was going to be in the Triangle, DeMargel said.

The idea was to have Aiken, who grew up in Raleigh, at a Bulls game. But "American Idol" handlers only wanted him to throw out the first pitch. Yet DeMargel, understanding Aiken wasn't going to be the most athletic guy in the ballpark that night, knew those who showed up would want to hear him sing. DeMargel said he managed to convince the "American Idol" people everything would be OK.

So Aiken flew into the ballpark in a helicopter, DeMargel said. The singer landed at second base. Yes, Aiken threw out the first pitch. But the guy hit a home run when he absolutely nailed the national anthem, DeMargel said.

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