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State

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Kids need time alone to play ball

Sitting on my porch the other day, I had an unrestricted view of a rare athletic event that I thought had gone the way of the Hula Hoop and penny candy at the corner store.

A group of kids, drawn by nothing more than the irresistible lure of a sweet spring day, began congregating on the grass field behind the middle school across the street. They came on bicycles and on foot, all of them carrying baseball gloves and a few with bats slung over their shoulders.



TOM WEBER

Then, after a brief though spirited discussion of who would play on what team, the boys took the field, threw out pieces of cardboard for bases and played baseball for the next hour or so.

The game had the look and feel of every baseball game that kids have played for a century or more, except for the ping of the aluminum bats, that is. The boys argued balls and strikes, cheered the pitchers, jeered at the batters and generally whooped it up as only carefree kids can do.

Yet as I watched this familiar scene, I was suddenly reminded of the one missing element in the whole raucous affair that gave it the dated look of a newsreel of decades ago, of a movie straight out of the 1950s. There was not a single adult to be seen anywhere — no parents sitting in lawn chairs along the foul lines to root them on, no coaches with clipboards to direct their movements, no umpires to call the game and resolve its many disputes.

The kids had put the game together entirely on their own, a masterpiece of spontaneous youthful design you don't see much anymore. And as the lone spectator, a fan in my private box seat, I found myself growing wistful for an earlier, perhaps simpler time that is long gone and not likely to return. It wasn't just about baseball itself, a game with the power to evoke nostalgia in many middle-aged men like me. It was more about the essence of play time itself and how adults have now insinuated themselves into all youthful recreation, overprogramming and oversupervising it as they do nearly every other aspect of children's lives these days.

It made me think of sandlots, those seedy symbols of youthful freedom, and to wonder whether they even exist anymore in this era of groomed fields and uniforms, of scoreboards and bleachers filled with parents who can't imagine children playing games without adults around to constantly cheer them on.

As a kid, my summer days required no such parental involvement. Each morning, I gulped down a quick breakfast, laced up my sneakers, grabbed my mitt, hopped on my bike and raced for the nearby sandlot. There, joined by just about every other kid in the neighborhood, we happily played baseball until the sun went down — an unsupervised, untutored, unregulated and largely unstructured brand of pickup ball whose rhythms were dictated solely by our own childhood whims. And if our mothers fretted over our extended absences, or if our fathers felt cheated out of sharing in our victories and defeats, they never said so. It was our playtime, and they left us to revel in it unimpeded.

But that world is past, I suppose, replaced by one that so many parents no longer trust, a place they believe is just too dangerous for children to explore on their own. I'm not sure that's true, but perception does have a way of creating its own convincing reality. Allowing children to go off and play by themselves no longer seems to be an option modern parents are willing to consider.

I don't lament the disappearance of the sandlot as much as I miss what it once represented: a playground where kids were free to experiment, to discover, to imagine and to experience, and all without a single grown-up there to show them how.

'Jessica's Law' may go to referendum

BY MAL LEARY
 CAPITOL NEWS SERVICE

AUGUSTA — The sponsor of a bill that would increase penalties for convicted child sex offenders says he will take his proposal to the voters if lawmakers do not pass it.

"I already have the paperwork and I have had it for a few weeks," state Sen. Dean Clukey, R-Houlton, said of the citizens' initiative petitions he would need to circulate to get his so-called "Jessica's Law" on a statewide ballot. "That's not what I want to do, but I feel this is what the people want. If the Legislature will not do it, the people will."

Last month, the House tabled Clukey's bill, which mandates a minimum 25-year sentence for a first-time

Vote planned if state doesn't pass bill to boost child sex offender penalties

offender convicted of a sex crime against a child under 12. Opponents argued the measure could do more harm than good, with prosecutors and others suggesting that the stiff minimum sentence would lead to more offenders asking for trials and to fewer convictions.

While lawmakers will have an opportunity to revisit the issue when they return next week, Clukey is prepared to take action if his bill is not passed. He said he is not running for re-election and will have time to work to col-

lect the signatures during the primary elections in June and the fall general election. He has no doubt enough signatures can be collected to force the issue. It takes just more than 50,000 signatures to initiate a statewide vote on legislation under the state constitution.

Clukey said he is willing to compromise on his original legislation, such as lowering the minimum sentence to 20 years, in order to have a law take effect this year, but he still wants some kind of mandatory minimum sentence established by the Legislature.

"That's what is wrong with his proposal," said Everett Fowle, the district attorney for Kennebec and Somerset counties. "When push comes to shove and you are talking about young victims of serious sex

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UM crew finds evidence of early Peruvian agriculture



Oswaldo Chozo, Ben Morris, Louis Fortin and Kurt Rademaker (left to right) assist the dig at the Peruvian Waynuna site at 12,000 feet above sea level.

COURTESY PHOTO BY DAN SANDWEISS

UNEARTHING THE PAST

BY RUTH-ELLEN COHEN
 OF THE NEWS STAFF

BANGOR — Exploring an ancient site in the Peruvian Andes a couple of years ago, University of Maine archaeologists were hoping to learn about the early migration patterns of South Americans.

Professor Dan Sandweiss and UM graduate student Kurt Rademaker never did find what they were searching for. But they discovered something just as important that last month landed them a citation in Nature, one of the most prestigious scientific journals in the world.

Findings from their 2004 excavation indicated that people in the Peruvian highlands were growing and eating corn long before previously thought — a startling piece of information that



Sandweiss

"Textbooks will need to be rewritten. It's a different story."

Dan Sandweiss

turns on its head a previously held theory that the development of corn agriculture very quickly led to the creation of large, sophisticated civilizations.

Thanks to the UM archaeological project, historians now know that corn — and agriculture in general — isn't what triggered those societal changes.

"We have now added a thousand years to the history of farming that led to the Inca empires and their predecessors," said Sandweiss, dean and associ-

ate provost of graduate studies who led the dig.

"Textbooks will need to be rewritten," he said. "It's a different story."

The same analysis also indicated remnants of arrowroot, a plant food from the tropical forest that can't grow in the mountains. Its presence shows that people from the eastern lowlands and the Andean highlands traded with each other.

"This supports the theory that the tropical forest influenced the development of early civilization in the Peruvian mountains," Sandweiss said.

Working 12,000 feet above sea level "in the shadow" of an ancient volcano, Sandweiss and his team hardly expected to make those findings.

Instead, they were hoping that the site was 11,000-13,000 years old — the same age as one that had been discovered.

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Health official pushes Part D Medicare plan

DHHS: May 15 deadline looms

BY TONI-LYNN ROBBINS
 OF THE NEWS STAFF

BANGOR — A U.S. Department of Health and Human Services official visiting the Eastern Agency on Aging urged beneficiaries on Wednesday to take advantage of the Medicare Part D program before the May 15 deadline.

Brian Cresta, DHHS regional director, toured the Bangor facility as part of a public relations visit, lauding the agency's help in assisting so many beneficiaries with complicated decisions.

Cresta's largest concern, however, was the coming deadline.

"The enrollment deadline is not going to move from May 15," Cresta warned.

Asked why the deadline wouldn't be extended to allow more people to sign up for the program, Cresta responded that the plan wasn't for everyone.

"We fully expect that some people will not



BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY KEVIN BENNETT

Brian Cresta, regional director of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Executive Director Noelle Merrill of Eastern Area Agency on Aging inform the media about their final push to enroll Maine's Medicare beneficiaries in the Part D plan.

take advantage of this benefit. This is an insurance plan, and some may decide not to take it," the federal official said.

EAA officials said 66 percent of the potential beneficiaries in the four counties —

Penobscot, Piscataquis, Hancock and Washington — for which Eastern Agency on Aging provides assistance, already have signed up for coverage.

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Collins directs planning summit

Communication key in disasters

BY MEG HASKELL
 OF THE NEWS STAFF

AUGUSTA — Quoting a sadistic prison guard in the classic film "Cool Hand Luke," Maine's U.S. Sen. Susan Collins told a gathering of emergency preparedness planners that the failed response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita last fall boiled down to one basic problem.

"What we have here is a failure to communicate," she drawled, the words sounding foreign in her twangy Aroostook County accent. Collins, who chairs the Senate Homeland and Governmental Affairs Committee, was in Augusta on Wednesday to speak at a special daylong conference on disaster response planning. She used the results of her committee's recently concluded investigation into the response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes to illustrate the many individual failures that together made for one of the worst natural disasters in the country's history, and exhorted planners in Maine to solve the problems as they prepare for whatever crises the future may bring.

"We've got to communicate like never before, because the

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Research center work proceeds

BY ERIC RUSSELL
 OF THE NEWS STAFF

WINTER HARBOR — Since the Schoodic Education and Research Center, or SERC, took over a former U.S. Navy base in this picturesque coastal town in 2002, the center has done little to improve those facilities.

That's about to change. SERC has commenced a \$3 million project to construct a 6,800-square-foot, 125-seat auditorium on the existing foundation of the base's former commissary building.

The center, located in the Schoodic Point section of Acadia National Park, is one of 16 such research centers nationwide facilitated by a National Park Service initiative to improve science-based understanding of park resources.

The center's coordinator said Wednesday that the renovations will bring SERC to a whole new level.

"This [project] will turn a pleasant but quaint facility into a state-of-the-art one, complete with all the high-tech capacity that people expect these days," said Jim McKenna, who was hired in January 2005 to head the SERC facility. "This is a very important step and it's some-

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