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Needle the material, not the umpire

Devil Rays fans can pull off a double play by taking part in Saturday's Stitch N' Pitch, which results in blankets for children in distress.

By WAVENEY ANN MOORE, Times Staff Writer
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ST. PETERSBURG - You might not know a home run from a touchdown, perhaps, but if you can knit, crochet, embroider, cross-stitch, needlepoint or quilt, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays and Project Linus want you.

Saturday is Stitch N' Pitch day at Tropicana Field. Yes, there will be a baseball game, but the Rays want fans to whip out their needles and catch the action, too.

A portion of ticket sales will benefit Project Linus, a charity that gives cuddly, comfy blankets to children in distress.

Judy Fielding is pleased. "I just think it's exciting to get the community involved and to raise awareness of Project Linus and the needs in the community," she said.

The Tierra Verde resident says she is out of the specially crafted blankets she distributes to local organizations including Alpha House, CASA, All Children's Hospital, Ronald McDonald House and guardian ad litem programs in the Tampa Bay area.

Project Linus is a national program that takes its name from the beloved Peanuts character created by Charles M. Schulz. It got its start in 1995 and has since provided 1.7-million blankets to children who have suffered from such trauma as hurricanes, abuse, illness and death.

Fielding, chapter coordinator for Florida's west central coast, said money raised from Saturday's game will be used to get blankets for children in

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raised from Saturday's game will be used to get blankets for children in the Tampa Bay area.

Other baseball clubs, including the Seattle Mariners, Chicago White Sox and Cincinnati Reds, have scheduled Stitch N' Pitch days this season. Fielding said she thinks this might be the first time Project Linus (projectlinus.org) will benefit from the event that is organized in conjunction with the National NeedleArts Association.

By the beginning of the week, almost 300 tickets had been sold for the event, said Richard L. Vaughn, vice president of communications for the Devil Rays. Ticket orders were being taken until today .

Similar events have gone smoothly at other ballparks, Vaughn said. Precautions, however, are being taken.

"All of the knitters will enter through a designated gate where we will have a special security checkpoint set up. The knitters will also be sitting in one specific area and we will closely monitor that section. We don't anticipate any problems," he said.

Besides those who'll be crafting in the stands, Saturday's event will feature displays connected to needle work. Vaughn said vendors and organizations ranging from quilting guilds to yarn shops have been invited.

"Fourteen of us will have tables," said Fielding, a former pediatric nurse at All Children's Hospital. "I'll have some quilts that ladies have made and have given permission for me to use for fundraising and handmade items that will be sold to raise money to buy fabric and supplies."

Among the items will be embroidered and personalized golf towels and sheet sets, said Fielding, who became involved with Project Linus in 2000, when she was trying to deal with the grief of losing her adult daughter to illness.

There was a reason the Devil Rays chose the Southwest Chapter of Project Linus to benefit from Saturday's game, Vaughn said.

"We thought it would perpetuate the Rays' involvement in children's charities, and the very nature of Project Linus is conducive to the stitching atmosphere of the event."

Fielding and two friends are the backbone of the local Linus Project. They make dozens of blankets, but their supply is supplemented by crafters from throughout the area. Fielding said many are created by residents in retirement communities, women from the Salvation Army, a group called the Helping Hands in Brooksville and crafters at the Landings at Sea Forest in New Port Richey.

She hopes Saturday's Stitch N' Pitch will provide the means for

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supplying many more blankets.

"With the funds we are going to get, we are going to use it to buy fabric, batting and yarn for the volunteers to make the blankets," she said.

"Because of them living in retirement communities and living on fixed incomes, they have limited funds, but big hearts."

The Stitch N' Pitch is a first for Tropicana Field. "We are all for creating fun experiences at the ballpark," Vaughn said.

"These aren't activities that you would typically link together, but an event like this helps us reach a segment of our fan base that might not necessarily be baseball fans and may not have been to Tropicana Field before. Our feeling is once we get them out to a game and experience all that we have to offer, they will want to come back."

By the way, the Rays are playing the Oakland A's.

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