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Umpire in the military says he's privileged to work the World Series

When the U.S. National Anthem was sung during the opening ceremonies of the Junior League World Series, one of the proudest people in Heritage Park was Mark Diaz.

Diaz, 45, has served in the U.S. Air Force for 24 years. Currently based in Germany, he is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and served in Kuwait, supporting the jets, transport planes and Army personnel that ran the patriot missiles.

When the war broke out, Diaz and his troop were the target of scud missiles. Many were knocked out of the sky by soldiers. The rest got through and some killed troops on the ground.

"I'm fortunate to be here," Diaz said.

Diaz and his family are based in Germany, where his current role is to send people, supplies, equipment and munitions down range to make sure fellow military has what it needs to fight.

This past week in Taylor, Diaz has been involved in a different type of combat between teen-agers on a baseball diamond. He was one of the 16 umpires who volunteered their time calling balls and strikes for some of the top teams during the Junior League World Series at Heritage Park.

Diaz is on an 18-day leave. One of his roles is fostering relations at Little League venues, something that has the support of his commander, Lt. Col. Dennis Primoli.

Prior to visiting Taylor, Diaz spent a week watching 15-year-old daughter Autumn, one of his three children, compete with the Kaiserslautern Military Community team in the Senior League Softball World Series in Delaware. Autumn, Diaz said, is one of the three best softball pitchers in Europe.

While in Delaware, Diaz was invited to speak about his experiences in the military. During his message, he urged everyone to remember their military who are fighting for their freedom.

His wife of 24 years, Holly, is a professional singer. She performed the American and German national anthems.

Then it was on to Taylor for Diaz, who seemed to be in his element behind the mask and chest protector, whether it was at the plate or down one of the base paths. He called balls and strikes during the International Pool game between Puerto Rico and Aruba. The game was not only considered one of the best games in pool play, it drew the biggest weekday crowd in Junior League World Series history.

In the world championship game -- a 9-1 victory by Arizona over Aruba -- Diaz was selected to work first base.

"Being part of this has been a privilege," Diaz said last week. "There's nothing like coming do a baseball tournament that includes players from all over the world. I am so excited to be here."

Diaz may have been destined to join the military. As the sixth of seven children, Diaz was a military brat. At least six members of his family were or are in the service, including his late father, Leo, who served 22 years in the Army, including two tours of Korea and one tour of Vietnam.

Three of his brothers also spent plenty of time in the military. Michael and Derek are retired from the Marine Corps. Adrian is in the Army, where he works on helicopters in Germany.

Diaz's Uncle David was a paratrooper in the Army; Uncle Jimmy served in the Navy.

Diaz said there are many benefits to a military career, including the travel and the people you meet. Diaz's own children are "military kids," he said. "We've been all around the world. These kids have been very lucky to go places most kids don't get to go."

In 1994, he was at the field prepared to watch his son Alex play baseball. The teams didn't have an umpire, so Diaz volunteered.

He remembers not having a ball-and-strike counter, much less other equipment, so he picked up seven rocks and stood behind the pitchers mound. He kept track of strikes by putting a rock in his right pocket. When a ball was called, he put a rock in his left pocket. It was that primitive.

"My dad used to umpire me when I was growing up, so I knew how to do it," he said. "I guess I wasn't too bad."

Diaz now umps both baseball and softball games and has called many tournaments, including 10 regionals and perhaps even more state tournaments. He finds most players, coaches and fans respectful of umpires. In fact, his positive evaluations from district officials led to the participation in the Junior League World Series.

His youth athletic reach has extended beyond umpiring. Diaz helped establish Little League in Luxembourg. The country has a team and hopes to some day participate in the World Series.

Diaz is close to finishing a degree in criminal justice and is getting ready for a transfer from Germany to the McCord Air Force Base in Washington State and then retirement for other pursuits. A native of Arizona, Diaz calls California home, so the transfer to the West Coast will work for him and his family.

While he's looking forward to getting "Americanized" again back in the states, Diaz admitted he would miss the military. He hopes to get involved in juvenile probation, which will allow him to work with children, one of his passions.

For sure, Diaz will continue with another of those passions, umpiring.

-- Dave Gorgon

